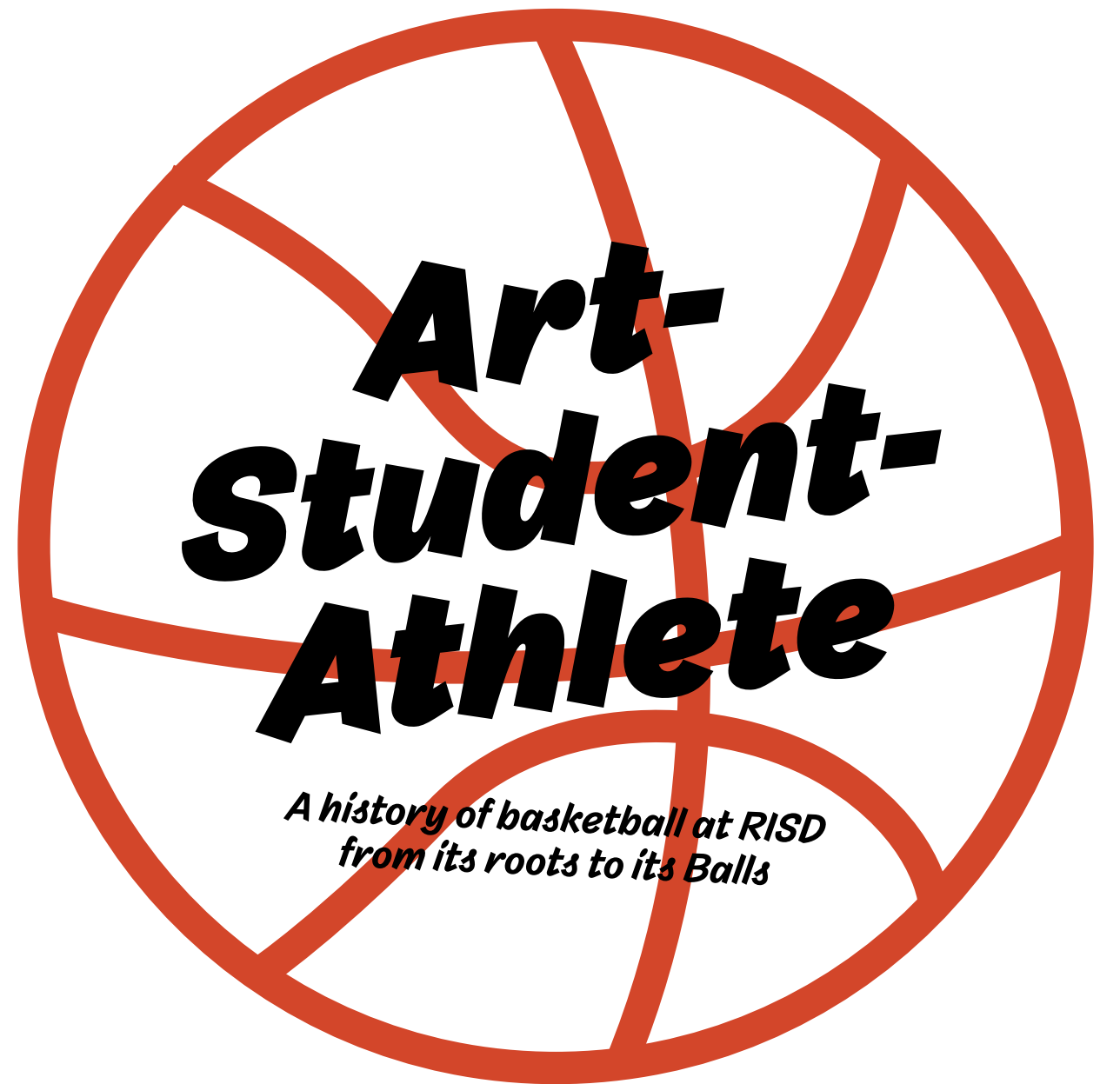




Art- Student- Athlete

*A history of basketball at RISD
from its roots to its Balls*

Ryan Scott

Contents

An introduction by the author, Ryan Scott 26 GD

1

1910–1945

9

1946–1960

21

1961–1968

43

An interview with...

Tim Prout 65 ID

71

Coach Larry Appleton 64 BS LA

77

Bill "Steamboat" Ewen 63 GD

85

1969–1999

95

An interview with...

Sean Gayle 90 ID

103

Randy Guillot 90 BArch

111

2000–2015

133

An interview with...

Joe Gebbia 05 GD/ID

221

Amanda Penecale 06 IL

231

Anthony Petrie 04 GD

237

Coach William "Bill" Miller 91 PT

243

Gavin Engel 12 ID

263

Don Morton

269

2016–2026

275

An interview with...

Coach Byron Olson 12 IL

313

Manny Hernandez 16 GD

325

President Emerita Rosanne Somerson 76 ID

335

Sarah Knarr

345

Tim Plummer 16 GD

351

Gresh Chapman 25 ID

357

Tila Adams

367

Coach Dorian Epps 21 ID

373

Conclusion & Special Thanks

385

Extras — Posters & Jersey Gallery

389

Bibliography

407

Index

409

Colophon

411

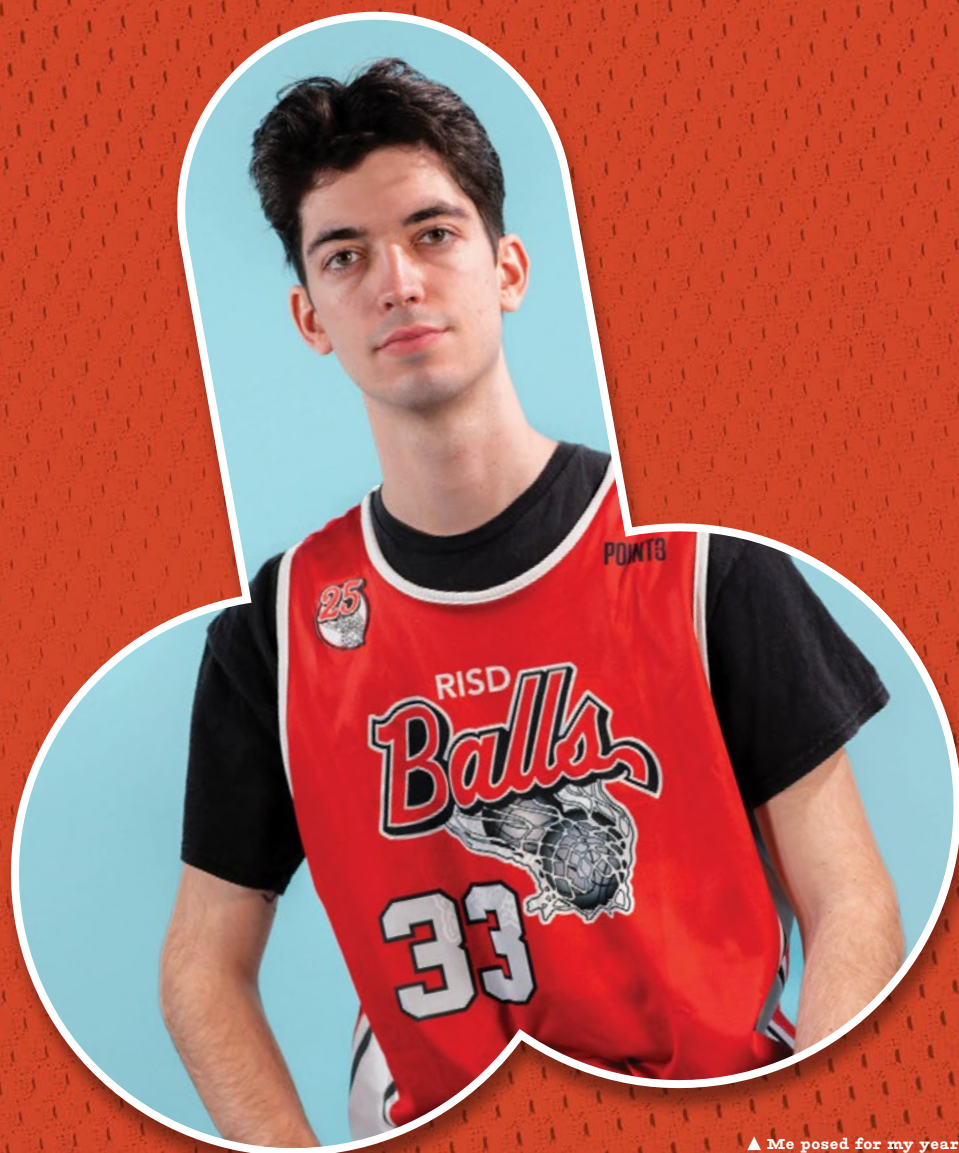


"Balls on 2!!"

◀ A group of Bryant University cheerleaders entertain a crowd during a game between RISD and Bryant at Hope High School. March 6, 1964

▶ A group of students celebrate during a Balls game against Pratt. February 5, 2010

"1, 2, Balls!!"



▲ Me posed for my yearbook photo. January, 2026

An introduction
by the author...

Ryan Scott 26 GD

MULTI-HYPHENATE

Many creatives like to call themselves “multi-hyphenates”. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be a jack-of-all-trades, but with it comes the fear of being a master-of-none. Multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary creatives can range from singer-songwriters, writer-directors, artist-activists, and all other combinations. Sometimes this need to define one’s identity by all the different types of work they can create can be a byproduct of pressures from an increasingly virtual and artificially connected collective and artists and designers that are constantly appearing on our devices to remind us that they can do everything we can but better and faster. As a result, I think this expectation to be too many things at once can stretch someone too thin and lead to a total burnout of creating, where the process becomes a series of obstacles all placed by their own expectations of who they think they should be. Sometimes, it is simply easier to be just one thing. That is not the lesson of this story.

Among those I listed earlier, another multi-hyphenate I’m sure you’ve heard before is “student-athlete”. In my mind, I first think of strapping young Ivy Leaguers playing tackle football in nothing but leather hats and striped shirts who later sit in lecture halls and smoke a pipe before study hall or something, but I’m aware that’s an inaccurate stereotype. Nowadays the term could be more commonly assigned to the thousands of collegiate athletes receiving Name, Image, Likeness (NIL) deals. For the first time, students-athletes were more than future diplomas and annual gifts in gym shorts, but magnets of financial and cultural wealth and influence. It would be more apt to tack on the extra hyphen and extend the label to

“student-athlete-millionaire” in regards to that, but that would be far too cynical and ignorant of the benefits now available to individuals who before were glorified unpaid laborers for multi-million dollar sports programs. No, I’m not jealous.

In addition to these student-athletes, college is also a time of labels, cliques, and social hierarchies. You may walk into your freshman year dorm and hope those high school days of lunch table tribes are far behind you, but now those cool kids can drink and smoke weed whenever they want with no after school programs to stop them, and they’re not sharing it with you. The first week is full of self-labeling. Name, pronouns, major, what dorm do you live in, where are you from, and do you have any pets are just some of the many differentiators that we all have to throw out there among our classmates and hope they think we’re cool. In your typical—or perhaps pop culture influenced vision of college life—you may have groups like the stoners, hippies, nerds, popular kids, athletes, and so on. But what about at a place like RISD?

The Rhode Island School of Design sits above much of the surrounding community atop a literal hill overlooking the rest of Providence. Yes, the neighboring Brown University may dwarf us in campus footprint and outnumber us in student body and academic offerings, but with any college campus, there is a sense of isolation from the rest of the “real” world. So, inside this bubble of art school kids, what groups form? Maybe a few experimental bands here or there. Of course stoners. No Greek life—thank God—but maybe a group of quasi frat bros who don’t need letters on a door to tell them where to party. Among the many social groups at RISD that form out of forced proximity or shared interests, the one that has always struck me as the most unique are those that mash together an unlikely pairing: art-student-athletes.

Of course, the accomplishments of your average student-athlete shouldn’t be understated. Some may be pursuing difficult degrees or receiving athletic scholarships to afford their tuition, but maybe others care less about their performance off the field unless it involves alcohol or sex. I think the art-student-athlete is unique as it’s a special kind of multi-hyphenate who balances the physical requirements of sports with the intellectual and emotional load of creating art on a weekly basis. My perspective is biased, but it is hard to overestimate the workload of an architecture student during finals week or the long studio hours spent painting or in a woodshop while still trying to find time to stay in shape and compete at a collegiate level. We’re not talking Division I national championships here—lower level Division III competition at the most—but still better than pickup at your local YMCA or Planet Fitness.

Those are the RISD basketball players, not only art-student-athletes, but ones who compete in a sport where it’s hard to hide behind the



▲ Me (far left) playing in the annual Balls on Balls team scrimmage. 2022–2023 season

skills of your teammates and stay out of the way. Basketball, from elementary to the NBA, is a game of speed, strategy, cooperation, and sometimes just the unexplainable power of momentum. With just you and four other people on your team going up against another squad of five, each player has their job and is expected to perform. A zone defense can’t succeed if a fifth of the scheme is slacking. A pick and roll play can’t finish in a smooth layup without a good pick or roll. When the play runs perfectly and the shooter sinks a wide open shot, even a casual fan can start to notice the patterns of the game. The invisible paths that connect all ten players to the two baskets are like long brush strokes across a canvas of polished maple. It’s a phrase repeated ad nauseum by sports analysts and documentary narrators, but it’s the truth—basketball is an art form. Maybe that’s why we all love it so much here at RISD.

By looking back at RISD’s almost 150 year history, you will find that sports, especially basketball, have been a part of that story for longer than you think. From the gritty days of “cagers” and satin shorts with belt loops all the way to the three point line and fashionable shooting sleeves, RISD has produced its own special recipe of basketball culture steeped in its relation to New England’s history with the game and blend of global identities that make your college years unforgettable. Do not expect decade long dynasties of championships, expensive



► A photo of me with RISD’s unofficial official mascot, Scrotie. May 2, 2024

brand deals, or even play on the court worthy of any adjective other than “alright”. RISD basketball is its own movement, its own style, and one that for the last 25 years has been known by the best possible moniker: the Balls.

This is a story worth preserving. It’s a story that is as much an awkward anecdote to tell your grandparents at Thanksgiving or students during freshman orientation as it is a testament to the strength of college kids too stubborn to take no for an answer. The facilities haven’t always been the best (or even present), the talent is inconsistent, and the name is hard to explain to an outsider. It’s bigger than the court or the season record. It’s about the fellow students who cheer us on unironically, make dick joke posters, and wear a shirt with two basketballs bouncing around in a net. It is a team of artists and athletes, never being just one half of that identity, but all that those passions contain existing all at once in harmony. We aren’t asking for much respect from the rest of our community, but just enough that lets us know that we are appreciated among the storied history of RISD. I’ll likely die before RISD begins handing out sport scholarships and fighting for conference championships, but maybe this book will help the future victors know where they came from. Remember, when the heat is on, the Balls stick together!



▼ I dressed up the RISD Beach whale statue as an early birthday celebration for the Balls 25th. Safe to say that facilities didn’t let it last long. September 1, 2025



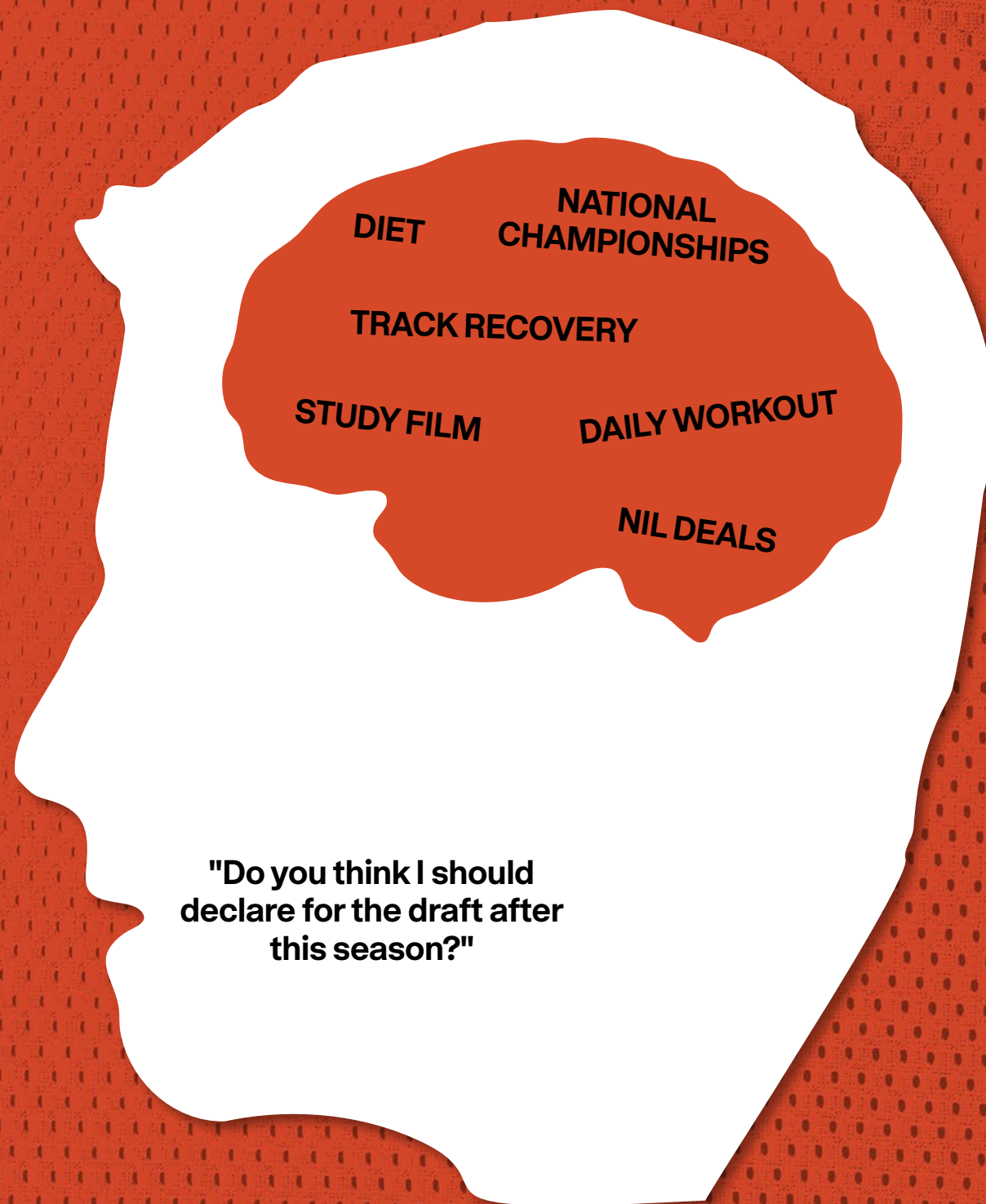
▲ A post victory team photo. 2023–2024 season



BEER
CRIT TODAY
VINTAGE MARKET
SMOKE BREAK
GALLERY OPENING
COOL TATTOO

"Wanna go to that
basement show this
weekend?"

*The mind of an
art-student-athlete*



DIET
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS
TRACK RECOVERY
STUDY FILM
DAILY WORKOUT
NIL DEALS

"Do you think I should
declare for the draft after
this season?"

*The mind of the
average college athlete*

1910-1945

BASKETBALL IS NEW ENGLAND

An examination of the history of RISD basketball would be fundamentally incomplete without first looking back at the origin of the sport itself and its place alongside the history of New England collegiate athletics.

Many may now consider the game of basketball to be one of the United States's greatest cultural exports right up there with McDonald's or Mickey Mouse, but the sport was first invented by a Canadian physical education teacher named James Naismith. The story goes that during an especially harsh New England Winter in Springfield, Massachusetts, Naismith was asked by the head of Physical Education at the International YMCA Training School, Dr. Luther Gulick, to create a game in just fourteen days to provide "athletic distraction" to a rowdy class unable to play outside.



◀ Naismith with one of the first basketball teams ever in Springfield, MA. c. 1891



▲ An early version of "basket-ball" played in Springfield, MA with a closed basket and no backboard or net. c. 1892

ended in a 5-1 victory for the students. A few years later, the first five-on-five game of basketball was held between the University of Chicago and the University of Iowa on January 18, 1896. Five years after that, the game reached Providence, just 90 miles from its birthplace in Springfield, in 1900 when Brown University held its inaugural season. On February 21, 1901 Brown recorded its first intercollegiate basketball victory with a 29-10 decision over Holy Cross at Brown's Lyman Gymnasium. The Brown Bears would finish the season with three wins and four losses.

Before the Rhode Island School of Design even had a basketball team, the culture of the sport was interwoven with the history of New England itself. Long before NBA or television exposed the rest of the nation and the world to basketball, it "came of age" in New England as legendary sportswriter Bill Reynolds once put it. Small Catholic colleges like Holy Cross and Providence College built modern basketball out of the rough foundation laid by James Naismith decades prior. The match-up zone defense and the fastbreak were invented in New England. The first modern basket with an iron rim was made in 1893 by the Narragansett Machinery Co. of Providence, Rhode Island. The game spread through local high schools and colleges where they appealed to similarly rowdy crowds of boys and girls who wanted something to do during the winter. Without this enthusiasm from educational institutions or leaders willing to take a chance on a new kind of game, the sport would've died in the cold, and that's where the story of RISD Basketball begins.

RISD GETS BALLS

Founded in 1877, RISD came to be during a time where great American sports were just beginning to flourish across the country. The first intercollegiate baseball and football games had occurred a few decades prior, and soon the invention of basketball would bring an entirely new pastime to the small New England school, and the rest of the country.

In 1908 a professor from Harvard named Huger Elliott arrived at RISD to take over as Director, a now defunct position abolished in 1929 with two co-equal positions that took its place: the Museum Director and Educational Director. During his short tenure from 1908-1912, he



▲ Portrait of Huger Elliott by Violet Oakley. c. 1921

Woonsocket 19, R. I. S. of D. 2.
The Woonsocket High School baseball team opened the season at Clinton Oval, Woonsocket, yesterday afternoon, playing the Rhode Island School of Design team of Providence and winning easily by the score of 19 to 2. The Woonsocket nine showed up well for an opening game.

The men played snappy ball and were fleet on the bases. The school, judging by the showing made yesterday, will have one of the strongest teams this year that it has had for several years.

Thorpe and McFee did the twirling for Woonsocket and were effective against the Providence boys. McFee did not allow the team to score. They were given good support. McFee's batting was the feature of the game. The pitchers for the Rhode Island School of Design team were poorly supported and the team was lamentably weak behind the bat.

The score:										
WOON. H. S.					R. I. SCHOOL OF D.					
	ab	lb	po	a c		ab	lb	po	a c	
O'Donnell, 3	3	2	3	2	1	Latham, c.	4	2	6	1
Randall, r.	0	0	0	0	1	Macrae, l.	4	1	13	0
Riley, s.	5	0	1	1	1	Pearson, r.	4	0	1	0
Gilbert, 2.	3	1	2	1	0	Morin, r.	4	1	0	0
Burt, m.	4	2	0	0	0	Smith, l.	4	0	0	0
McCarthy, l.	3	2	1	0	0	Harvey, m.	4	0	0	0
McFee, l. p.	5	4	7	3	0	Witt, 3. p.	4	0	0	5
Thorpe, p. l.	5	0	5	2	0	Fuller, s.	2	0	1	0
Cook, c.	3	1	5	1	1	Lewis, 2.	4	2	2	4
McGuire, c.	2	0	4	0	0	McCarthy, p. 3	4	0	2	0
						Laughlin, 3.	1	0	0	0
Totals...	30	12	27	10	4	Totals...	35	6	23	12

Innings..... 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Woonsocket 11, 8.... 3 2 2 1 2 1 1 7 x-10
R. I. School of Design 1 0 1 0 0 0 0 0-2
Runs—Cook, O'Donnell 3, Randall, 3, Riley 2, Gilbert 3, Burt 3, McCarthy 2, McFee 3, Thorpe 10; Macrae 2. Two-base hits—Lewis, Gilbert, McCarthy, McFee. Three-base hit—O'Donnell. Sacrifice hit—McCarthy. Double play—Gilbert to O'Donnell. Struck out—By Thorpe 5; by McFee 5; by Witt 1. Wild pitch—Witt. Hit by pitcher—McCarthy. Passed balls—Cook, McGuire, Latham 3. Umpire—Murray. Time—1h. 45m.
Thorpe out.

East Greenwich Academy defeated Rhode Island School of Design in an easy game last night in the former's gymnasium by the score of 42 to 7. At the end of the first half the score was 22 to 2. The features were the floor work of Wheelock and the fine basket shooting by Holt and Cruz. In the first half Wheelock worked the ball out of a scrimmage and threw a basket nearly the whole length of the floor.

EAST GREENWICH, SCHOOL OF DESIGN.
Cruz, l. f. Cruz, g. Crooks
Holt, r. f. Holt, g. McCauley
McCloud, c. Bertch
Wilbur, l. g. Bertch
Wheelock, r. g. Miller
Baskets from the floor—Holt 10, Cruz 9, McCloud, Wilbur, McCauley, Bertch, Miller. Goal from foul—Bertch. Referee—Shelton. Time—Four 10-minute periods.

CENTRAL FALLS HIGH TEAM DOWNS SCHOOL OF DESIGN

Basketball Quintet Hangs up 17 to 6 Decision.

The Central Falls high school basketball team played rings around the Rhode Island School of Design team in the game at Central Falls last night. The score was 17 to 6. The home boys gained the lead early in the game and kept it throughout, not allowing the visitors a single basket in the second half. Moore led with six baskets. Sullivan played a fast game and Bertch starred for the losers. The lineups:

C. F. H. S.	R. I. S. D.
Moore, r. f.	Bertch
McCauley, l. f.	Crook
Mulvaney, c.	Barlow
Hanna, l. b.	Miller
Sullivan, r. b.	Hanna
Goals from floor—Moore 6, McCauley, Hanna, Bertch, Hanna. Goals from fouls—Bertch 2, Moore. Referee—Shelton. Umpire—Tougas. Scorer—Sheldon. Time—Ryan. Time of halves—20 minutes.	

SCHOOL OF DESIGN WINS 6-0 VICTORY

Hayward Scores Only Touchdown in Game with Woonsocket.

MAKES FINE 30-YARD RUN

High School Lads Play Poor Game, but Use Forward Pass Successfully. Tingley, 'Winners' Quarter, Does Great Work.—Gladue, Dunn and Cook Play Well for Losers.

The Rhode Island School of Design football team took the measure of the Woonsocket High School eleven in a slow game yesterday afternoon on the latter's grounds, the score being 6 to 0. The high school lads put up a very poor exhibition and although the score would indicate a very close game such was not the case. The Rhode Island School of Design team did not play brilliant football by any means and any eleven with any knowledge of the game whatever would have had little trouble in getting the verdict over the rubber city upper grade youngsters yesterday, judging from the brand of ball they played.

The homesters were handicapped by the loss of two regulars in Lee, the left half-back and Nalloux, the right tackle. In only one period did the local team show symptoms of playing football, that being in the last quarter when it was too late. They again used the forward pass successfully, this being their feature play. The Rhode Island School of Design scored their only touchdown in the second period when Hayward made a nifty 30-yard run around right end for a touchdown. They played a fine game, considering the fact that they played but one game before this season, but at that had Woonsocket played the kind of game that was expected of them they would not have had much trouble in defeating the local team.

Tingley, the opposing quarter, played a brilliant game, and together with Hayward, at half, were the best ground gainers for the winners. For Woonsocket Capt. Gladue's and Dunn's work on the fence, and Cook's playing at end, were the bright spots. The summary:

R. I. S. D.	WOONSOCKET.
Magauley, Thorpe, Pierce, Henry, I. C.	Dunn
Gough, l. l.	Bryant, Desrosiers
Morrison, l. g.	Murphy
Grant, Pierce, c.	White
Banning, r. g.	Tulin
Friend, r. l.	Gladue (Capt.)
Falles, r. c.	Cook
Tingley, q. b.	Dalgault
Hayward, r. b. b.	Davis, Freeman
Miller, l. h. b.	Senter
Captain, l. b.	Hudson
Score—R. I. S. D. 6, Woonsocket 0. Touchdown—Hayward. Referee—Kenney of Woonsocket. Umpire—Rochelleau of Woonsocket. Line-men—Malloux and Connell. Time—Lent. Time—Two 10 and two 8-minute periods.	

▲ A collection of articles from The Providence Journal Archives reporting on athletic events involving RISD students.

April 13, 1907

May 21, 1910

October 16, 1912

February 28, 1914

December 10, 1913

taught Architecture, lectured on the History of Art, designed the first RISD seal, laid the groundwork for the publication of *The Rhode Island School of Design Bulletin*, arranged the exhibition of students' work, and—most important to this story—supported the introduction of sports at RISD.

Prior to Elliott's appointment, there had been some precedent for athletics at RISD, but it was clear that more formal support from the school and its student body was needed. A 1944 yearbook once gave a history of RISD over the past 66 years. Under 1908 it noted:

"Once there was a baseball team, somewhat inglorious perhaps, but a baseball team at that. They practiced pitching in an alley near the school".

The Providence Journal similarly reported on a few baseball games as far back as 1907 between RISD and local high schools like La Salle and Woonsocket, but both ended in defeat for the team known as "the Design boys".

By 1910 the athletic culture at RISD had exploded, with reports of a women's basketball team and the continuation of a baseball team that practiced around campus and drew attention from the student body for their "stunning new suits", thought no photographs of them have survived or been uncovered. A RISD football team was also reported on during this time, as they once played a local penitentiary and defeated Woonsocket High School 6–0. They may have been referred to by fellow students as "a scrubby football team which used an ungraded patch of ground near the school for practice" who held no home games and hardly ever won, but what kept these teams alive was a love for sport. As the 1914 yearbook put it:

"The boys of the school had begun, several years ago, to organize teams for their own amusement. These had always been more or less feebly supported by passing the hat when it seemed necessary, which occurred frequently".

For the next one hundred years, sports at RISD continued to fluctuate between states of student-led, or school-sponsored endeavors.

THE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

In October 1912, the first meeting of the Athletic Association was held by the male students of Memorial Hall. Instead of begging for donations from fellow students, a system of yearly dues was established. For \$1.50 a year — equivalent to almost \$50 today — men's sports finally had a formal source of funding. The following January, female students joined the association with the women's basketball team for just seventy-five cents per player. Following this school year, it was noted that "the students of the Main Building began to realize that the new organization was more than a mere rumor. From then on, the school as a whole [...] supported the new enterprise".

By 1914, five teams had organized at RISD: football, hockey, baseball, men's basketball, and women's basketball. In an example of perfect foreshadowing for the future of RISD athletics, one yearbook writer put it best by saying: "To the outsider, an athletic association

may seem a misfit in a School of Design. It is, nevertheless, an axiom that wherever there is a group of able-bodied boys there will be a football or baseball team spring up by tacit consent". However, as in previous years, many teams lacked proper practice fields or courts. The football team especially needed a level field instead of the small patch of ungraded ground between campus buildings they reportedly played on. Obviously we know RISD never received this great football field, or any large plot, and it's likely this was the reason the team never lasted into the modern day like other sports like basketball and hockey.

The basketball teams likewise lacked any courts to practice on, but the men's team somehow was able to record a 5–6 season. The Athletic Association greatly criticized the RISD administration for its lack of support for sports, arguing that:

"A team is an advertisement, good or bad, for the school whose name it bears. Can we afford to have our school looked upon as an institution lacking in efficiency because our athletic teams lack the efficiency which only comes through practice under favorable conditions?"

As with concerns over funding, the struggle to balance practice space and time with the demands of studio work is another theme that continues to challenge RISD sports to the present day. In December of 1915 the Textile Building, now called the Metcalf Building, was constructed. In addition to obvious studio space for textile students, the fourth floor provided a basketball court for the teams. There are no surviving photographs of this space, but I'm sure the students working on the third floor at the time wished dribbling was still illegal.

The sport of basketball found itself with a similar size problem around this time, but was able to be played in many small gyms and recreation centers around the US. It wasn't until the late 1920s that large city arenas began to appear in places like Boston, but even those were still out of reach for a majority of young players. Before modern NBA teams began to appear in New England in 1946 or even the first NCAA men's basketball tournament, high school basketball was the unlikely steward of a soon to be global game. "In small, often isolated New England towns, high school basketball was one of the ways in which the American ideal was actualized" wrote Bill Reynolds "It didn't matter what your father did. It didn't matter what your family's station in life was." In towns like Fall River, seventeen miles from Providence, this once textile capital of the world fell on hard times after the textile industry moved south after World War I, and the coming Great Depression didn't help much. But in these towns, the people turned to the Durfee High basketball team, who brought state titles to a place the rest of New England had left in the past.

In 1920 Frank Keany arrived at the University of Rhode Island. He believed in having a strong passion for whatever you did, something he called "the old gazazza". Keany was never short on *gazazza*, serving as the university's basketball, football, baseball coach, athletic director, and chemistry teacher. This passion bled on to the basketball court, where he added a whole new speed to the game that was the opposite of the more slow-paced play of the time. Critics called it "racehorse basketball", but under his leadership, the fastbreak was born. Today, the URI Rams like to say they "bleed Keaney Blue".



Standing — MILLER, MCGAULEY.
Seated — CROOK, BARLOWE, BIESEL, BERTCH

▲ RISD's men's basketball team,
as seen in the 1914 yearbook.
c. 1914

THE SALAMANDER AND THE STUDENT DESIGNER

December 1925 saw a continued enthusiasm for basketball as twelve students met twice a week at the local Providence Boys' Club. The writer of a piece in the RISD student newspaper, *The Salamander*, wagered that the team was the best in the history of the school. A Textile department faculty member served as the manager of the team, scheduling games against schools like Providence Trade School, Durfee Textile School, Hope High School, Bryant and Stratton, Providence College Freshmen, Rhode Island College of Education, Koinonic Club, Rhode Island State Freshmen, Boston School of Normal Art, among others. It appeared, as always, that student support wasn't always the best, with the writer stressing: "We would like to see a crowd out for every game, for it is a well-known psychological fact that support makes the team win where otherwise it might easily be defeated." Despite low attendance, pep rallies were still held before games against larger schools, with even some cheering on the team by saying "Let's Go Design!"

As for women's basketball, a faculty member also served as manager and coach. The team averaged around ten members during weekly practices in the Textile Building, with some players well noted for their skills thanks to previous experience playing in high school. No games had been scheduled by the time the 2025–2026 season was underway, but there was hope for them to play during halftimes of the men's team's games. It is unclear if this plan ever came to be.

Later in the season the men's team's hopes of a great season vanished with four straight losses after starting with three wins. The team, referred to as "the Designers" was described as one made up of fast-paced, scrappy players that put up an exciting performance no

◀ A drawing from the Athletics
section of the 1914 yearbook.
c. 1914

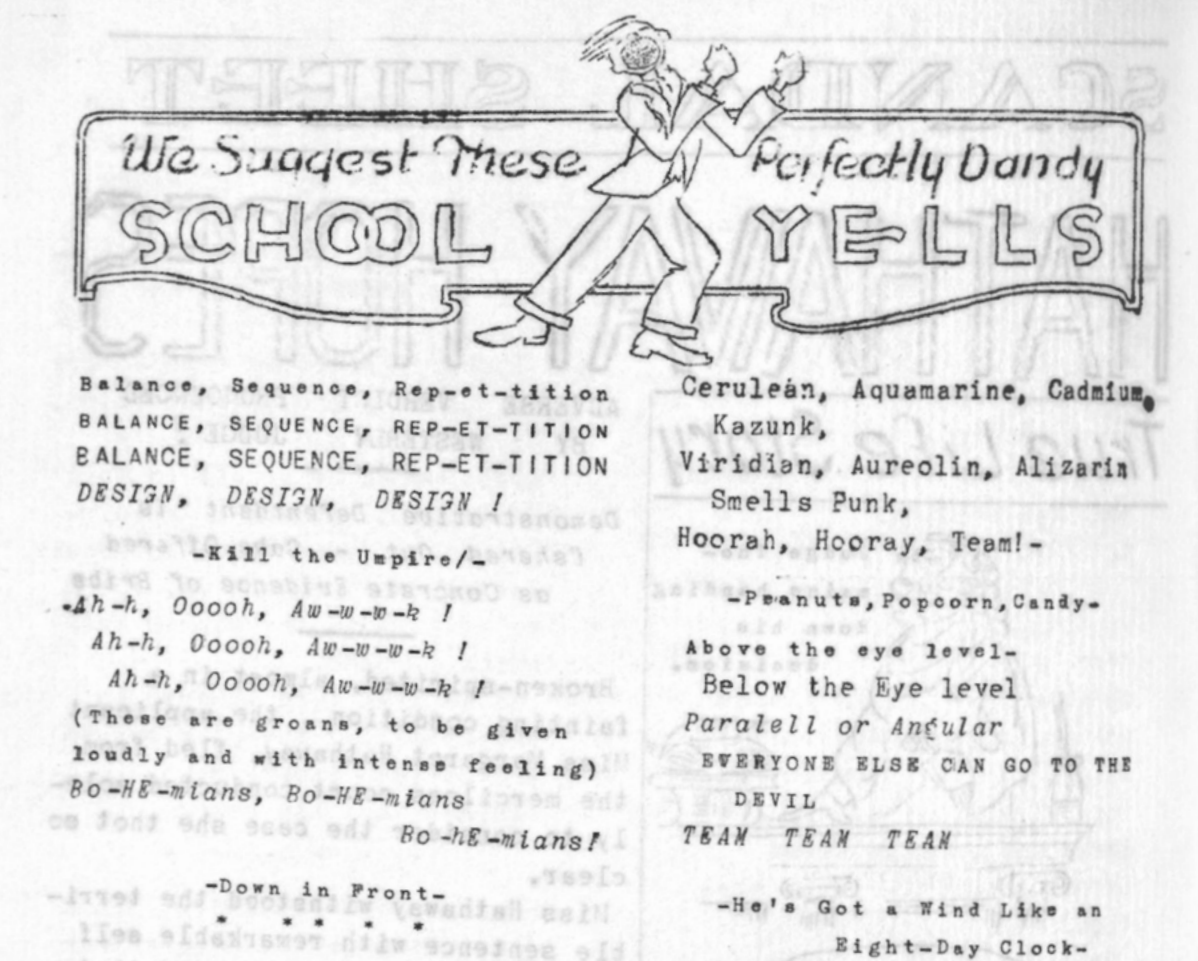
matter the outcome. The team would fortunately go on to win the rest of the games in February of 1926, with one game well attended by the student boy thanks to Painting faculty member Herman Itchkavitch for “herding” a group of students to go to the Providence Boys’ Club to see the team play.

The following spring the baseball team continued to practice, with some batting cages being also being installed within the Textile Building, although it is unknown where exactly they were built and what they looked like. At an Athletic Association meeting held in Memorial Hall, funds were raised for the team and time used to brainstorm new ideas for cheers, citing a “lack of good, snappy yells”.

In December of 1929 a new student newspaper, called *The Student Designer*, featured a sports section detailing athletics around the RISD campus. The women’s basketball team continued to practice in the Textile Building, but by this time they considered the court “hardly suitable” and their gear “very unsatisfactory”. In spite of this, the men’s team continued to thrive with games against Holy Family High School, Bryant and Statton, and Durfee Textile. There weren’t many victories but many agreed “The brightest spot in the game was the loyalty of some twenty-five rooters. It was great to hear them cheer!” Around this time a hockey team was also organized and played against local high schools at the now demolished RI Auditorium, home to the Providence Reds hockey team of the time. The school’s wrestling team searched for “new men” as well and students agreed “it’s about time we had a mascot. No concern would go without a trade mark and no school should be without its mascot.” If only they knew eighty years from then they would have a giant penis named Scrotie to call their own.

Into 1930, the Providence Journal reported on the games of the RISD basketball team, including a 25–17 loss to East Greenwich Academy, a 35–33 win over New Bedford Textile, and a 48–24 blowout victory over the Rockefeller Club of Brown University. If it wasn’t already clear from previous games, RISD basketball during this time continued the tradition of playing pretty much anyone who would agree to face them. Now defunct boarding schools, small trade schools later absorbed by larger state institutions, and whatever club teams organized by surrounding Providence universities weren’t only the teams RISD played, but really some of the only ones in existence at that time. It wasn’t until 1936 that the New England Conference was formed, allowing for more organized sports competition among colleges and universities like Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, and Northeastern. The first NCAA Tournament for basketball was held in 1939, in which RISD’s Ivy neighbor Brown competed in as one of eight colleges, a fraction

▼ RISD's women's basketball team, as seen in the 1914 yearbook. c. 1914



▲ Students brainstorm various cheers in an issue of *The Salamander*. March 1925

of the sixty-plus seed tournament it is today. Like a weird, little baby bird stuck in a nest, basketball was, at this moment, still not strong enough to go beyond the high schools and small men’s clubs of New England, but nevertheless it was growing quickly.

Back at RISD, many observed and supported this duty of supporting this great American sport still in relative infancy. In one great moment of self-promotion and self-preservation, a piece in a January 1930 issue of *The Student Designer* pushed back against those who criticize the Athletic Tax students had to pay while attending RISD. The article, written by Abie Booth, pointed out how important the tax was to the future of clubs and sports at RISD, making it clear that all had to pay their dues to keep things like this alive. If it wasn’t already clear, Booth played on the basketball team.

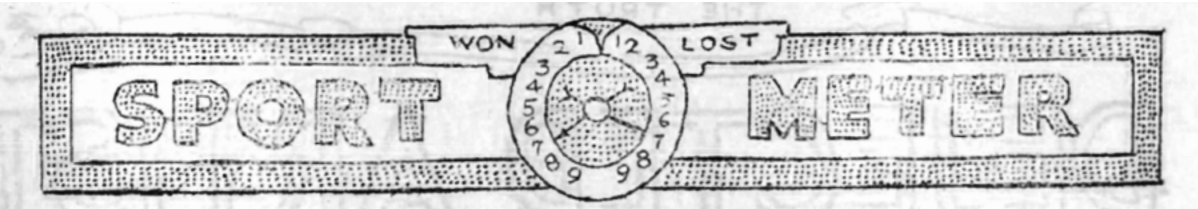
THE FIRST GREAT DEATH OF BASKETBALL

Later in February of 1930, the women’s team was able to finally move practices to the Providence Boys Club. At the same time, the men’s team experienced its own kind of shake up. In an issue of *The Student Designer*, it was reported that the team would finish out the season with an entirely new team, now being assisted by a manager named Edmund/Edward Yaghjian, who graduated from the Painting department the previous year. The team’s coach, Donald W. Hurd, a Math teacher at RISD from 1920 to 1951, planned to put in a new policy for the following season. Hurd required all participants to have a physical exam or signed certificate from a doctor in order to guard against “physical defects” among the team. Other proposed rules included signing an agreement that guaranteed that RISD basketball players would only play for the RISD team, which makes you wonder what

kind of team-wide flaking was going on at the time and where the hell were these guys playing if not at their own college? A third, and perhaps most infamous, rule stated :

"A system of training remains to be worked out in detail. It is sufficient to say that it will require a total abstinence in regards to tobacco, liquor and a common sense application of sane eating, particularly near practice and game periods."

Hurd believed the team had “disgracefully lost” its local standing and that these rules would help get the team back on the right track. If the person reading this (i.e. you!) has attended RISD or knows the kinds of people who fill up the halls and studios, it will not surprise you that shortly after this season, the men’s basketball team experienced another period of “hibernation”.



▲ Headline from the sports section of *The Salamander*. February 1926

That isn’t to say that the basketball team was made up primarily of chainsmoking winos who would never agree to be coached by a straight-edge coach like Hurd, since it appears the team may have continued for at least another season after this new system was implemented. Student interviews in school newspapers also mentioned Seniors’ general interest in basketball, but there are no mentions of a formal team after that school year. It becomes difficult during this time, as well as many others, to find any concrete evidence of the team’s existence among RISD’s archives or other online sources. Maybe they continued playing and nobody cared enough to write it down? From all other evidence I could find, the women’s team surprisingly experienced a brief renaissance, seeing over forty new students try out the following school year, even receiving honors at a ceremony in Memorial Hall in May 1931. The form this "honoring" took is unclear however. At the same ceremony, the hockey team was honored with a cup representing a championship of the Auditorium Hockey League, having gone undefeated during their season.

In 1936, the Works Progress Administration supplied the funding to build a new high school on Hope Street, aptly named Hope High School. At its completion, it became one of the largest in the United States, with a student capacity of 2,200 and 60 classrooms. It was not noted by those involved with student activities at RISD, but the construction of the school would soon be the next great incubator of RISD basketball history in just a few decades, but for now, the game fell back into a state of casual pick up games and unrecorded stories lost to time.

The 1930s turned to the 1940s at RISD and basketball continued to sit dormant. Baseball games between faculty and students, swimming clubs, and other sparse athletic activities were reported in school newspapers and yearbooks, but basketball was absent from any list of sport clubs for some time. It would not help that the United

States entered World War II in December 1941 following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. War time restrictions and an obvious lack of male students at RISD contributed to a severe drought in social and athletic activity. In the 1944 yearbook, over one hundred sixty students are listed as “playing in the war”. For a time, the students of RISD focused on more important things than intercity basketball games and drama between coaches and players, but once the war ended, RISD and its athletic teams would soon have a boom of their own.



A beautifully developed technique or a nearly perfect knowledge of color is darned silly and useless at times. And these times can interrupt at any stage of the school career. Anyone is plumb crazy who spends all her or his time trying to make well enough better. Physical development is not to be underrated as a study. Often it is completely disregarded.

► An excerpt from an issue of *The Salamander*. March 1925

1946 / 1960

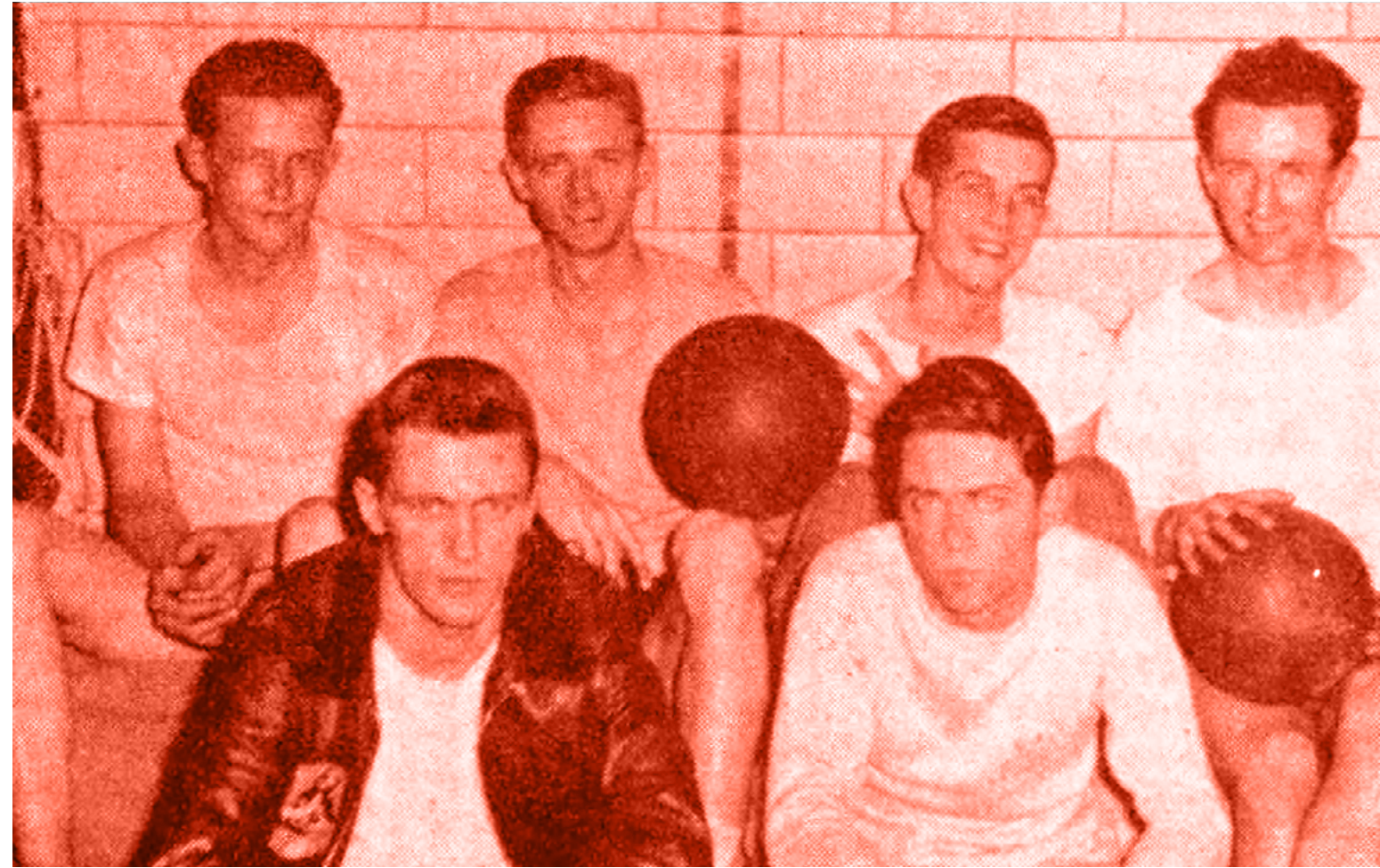
BASKETBALL BOOM

With World War II coming to an end and Americans returning back home, RISD experienced the same great boom of life and activity that every other corner of the nation saw during the mid to late 1940s. I am not going to pretend like I have an expert-level knowledge of post war economic and societal history in the United States, but it's almost possible to chart that history through an examination of the social club scene at RISD. Despite a previous formation in 1912, students in November 1946 incorrectly boast the first meeting of the school's Athletic Association. Formed by the Student Union, the Association began its existence by granting funding for an intramural basketball league for RISD's many departments to participate in. It's reported that the men of the school had expressed interest during the previous winter and spring months, so finally the sport made its organized return.

The 1947 yearbook noted that the Athletic Association was first implemented by the Freshman class in spirit, as they met twice a



▲ Students play casual pickup basketball at the RISD Gym. c. 1947



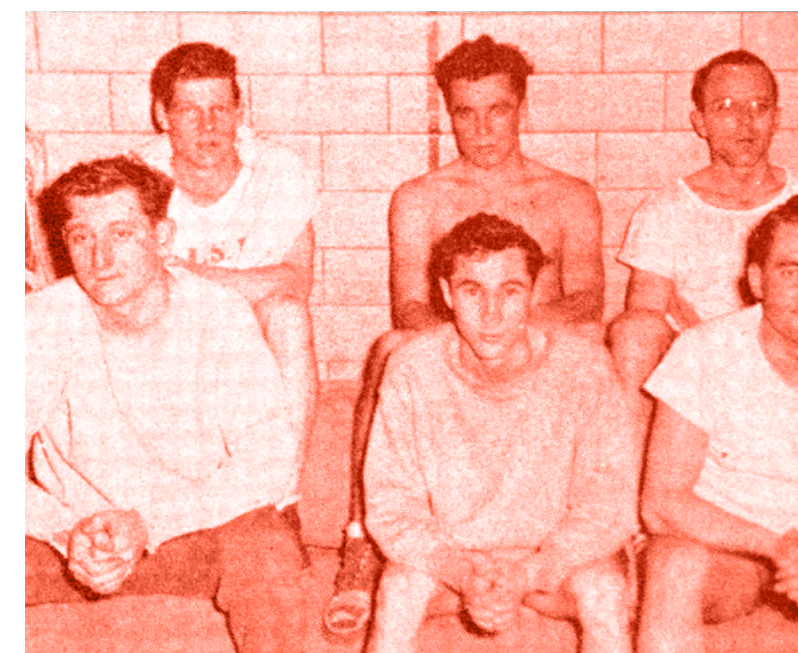
▲ Students playing basketball in the RISD Gym photographed for the RISD Yearbook *Portfolio*. c. 1947

The next two pages feature photos from the same yearbook.

week for games, and some were referred to as “better than average”. It is unknown where exactly these men met to play, as the grainy photos featuring tanktop-clad designers don’t list their location. In the coming years, however, games would soon begin to be held at the RISD Gym, a small but serviceable court housed within the People’s Savings Bank, an old stone building on North Main Street purchased by the school during this time and one that has gone through countless renovations over the decades. Today, the building houses the RISD 3D supplies store and parts of the Furniture Design department, but for a time students actually had a home court, and not just the borrowed space of nearby high schools or social clubs around the city of Providence.



The following year in 1948, RISD’s yearbook reported another successful year of athletic activities around campus, writing about the continuation of the intramural basketball league and plans to form an official school team the next school year. After a meeting of the Athletic Association, it was decided that RISD would join the Southern New England Coastal Conference Basketball League. The league was made up of RISD, Bryant College (now Bryant University), New Bedford Textile, and Calvin Coolidge College. In a move emblematic of the strange early history of professional basketball leagues during this time, the Providence Steamrollers, founded in 1947 as a member of the Basketball Association of America, hosted a short scrimmage between RISD and Bryant before one of their home games at the now demolished Rhode Island Auditorium. Led by coach and faculty-advisor David Burghoff, the team wore maroon and gray uniforms and showed a “fighting spirit”. Players included Robert Rothacker, Warren Luther, Bliss Thayer, Leon Mordas, Victor Koltun, Charles Chookazian, Arthur Williams, and Stanley Berenburg. It’s unclear



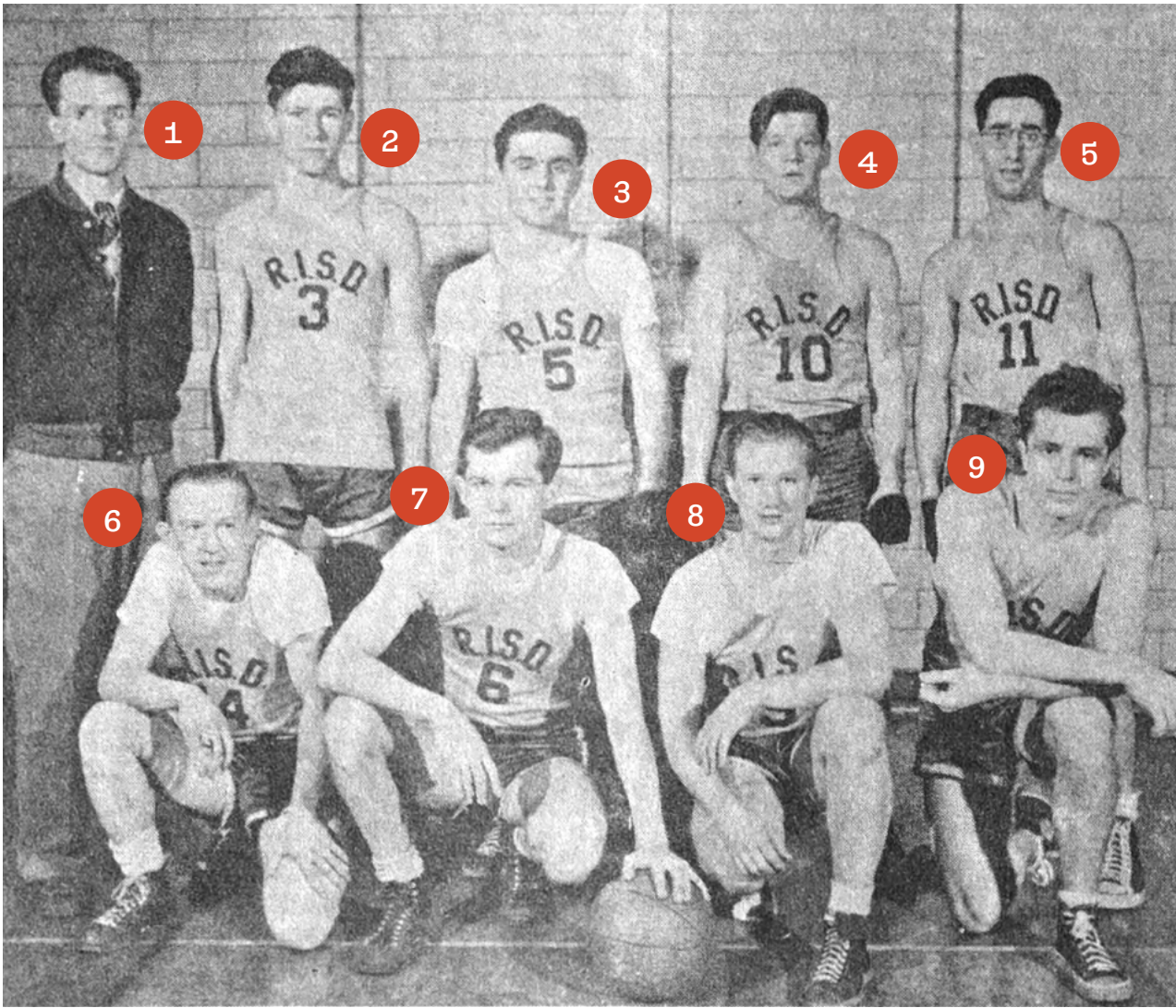
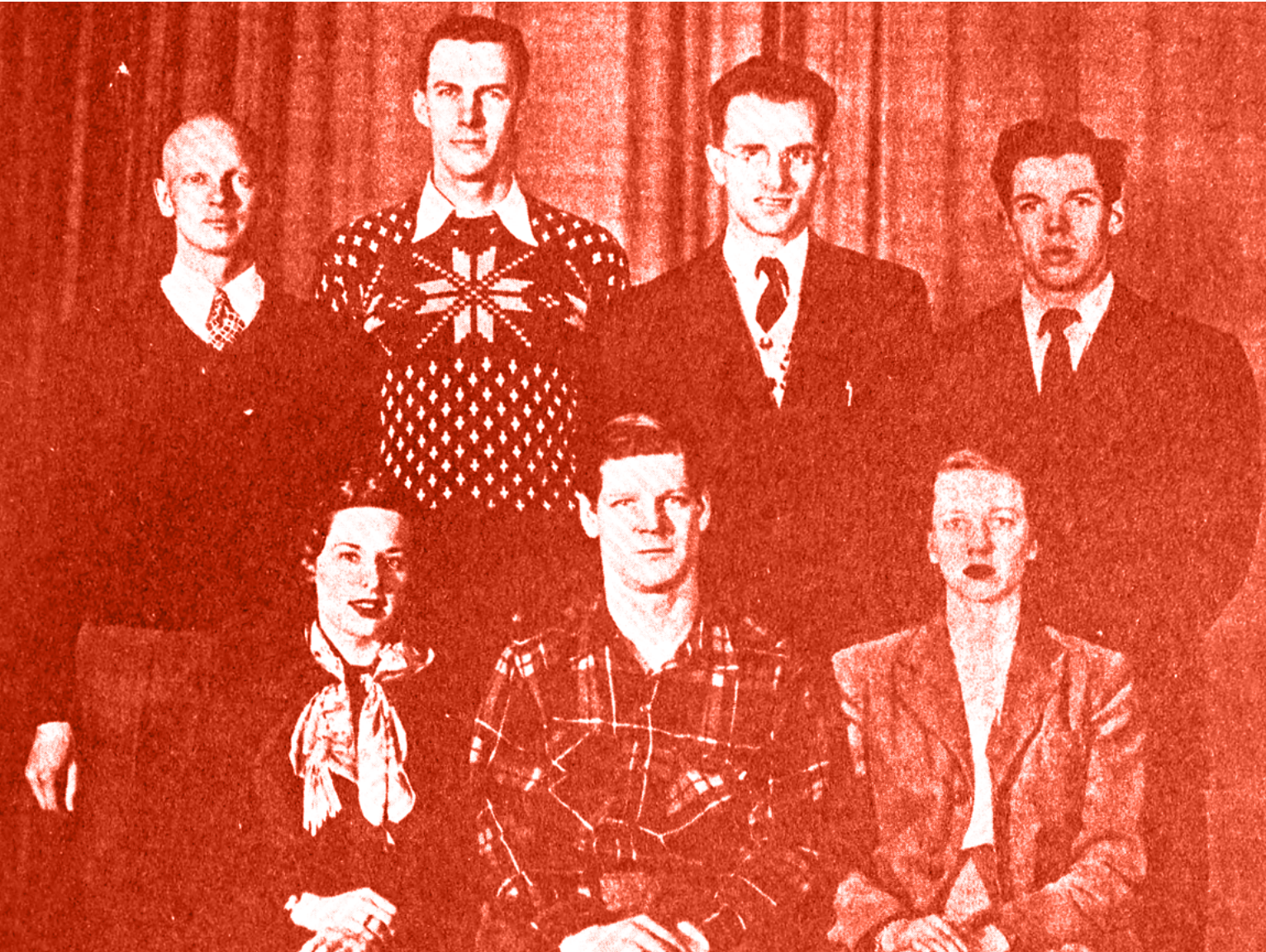
what the outcome of this game was, but it proved to be just another example of desperate promotion during the short and unremarkable three-year existence of the Providence Steamrollers.

As previously mentioned, RISD purchased the Bank Building in August of 1948. A 1958 student wrote about the move, stating that “what once echoed with the sounds of typewriters and adding machines now echoes with the shouts of volleyball and basketball games”. With this move, basketball and sports at RISD only continued to grow with such a convenient location in the heart of campus on North Main Street. A piece in the 1949 yearbook seemed shocked by the sudden wave of athletic enthusiasm, as they wrote “Can it be that this much sought after, this nebulous, undefinable something called ‘school spirit’ is at last emerging from blushing reticence?” Like any other decade in the history of basketball at RISD, the atmosphere and camaraderie of sports tapped into a previously hidden part of the RISD student’s psyche rarely seen by choice—genuine enthusiasm for what’s going on around campus. As one student put it so perfectly:

“We designers are slowly but surely getting organized in the field of athletics. And by the way, you, you, and also you belong to this comparatively new organization at R.I.S.D., for unbeknown to many, all members of the Student Association are automatically members of the Athletic Association as well.”

► The aptly named “Burghoff-men”. c. 1948

▼ David Burghoff (standing, second from right) with the Athletic Association photographed for the RISD yearbook. Burghoff served as both faculty advisor and coach of the basketball team. c. 1948



1

David Burghoff

2

Victor Koltun

3

Charles Chookasian

4

Arthur Williams

5

Stanley Berenburg

6

Robert Rothacker

7

Warren Luther

8

Bliss Thayer

9

Leon Mordas

MAJOR LEAGUE BASKETBALL

Children 1/2 Price with Adults!
TOMORROW NIGHT 8:30
PROV. STEAMROLLERS vs.
FORT WAYNE "PISTONS"

New Comer to the B. A. A., former National League Team!

Tickets at Auditorium and O'Donnell's, Prov.; Dan Norton and L. S. Mooney, Pawt.; P. & Q., Woon.; Frazee's, Fall River; Heffernan's, Newport; Ray-Dar Sports, Bristol.

Res. Seats
1.25-1.80-2.50

RHODE ISLAND Auditorium

	Today	Tomorrow	Today	Tomorrow
12:35	6:55	1:10	7:20	
1:30	7:40	1:55	8:00	

RISD QUINTET PREPS FOR LEAGUE OPENER

The Rhode Island School of Design basketball team of the Southern New England Coastal Conference is nearing the completion of its pre-season practice. Although the team is only in its second year, it has shown much promise for the coming campaign.

Coach David Burghoff has eight varsity players of last season's team as the nucleus of the Design team. A few promising freshmen will round out the squad.

The returning veterans are Capt. Warren Luther, Stan Berenberg, Leon Mordas, Vic Kolton, Bill Dalton, Mark Chookazian, Bob Goodwin and George Maver.

The first game is listed for Nov. 23 against Bradford Durfee Textile Institute, last year's conference leaders, at Fall River. Other members of the Southern New England Cost Conference are Bryant College, New Bedford Textile, and Calvin Coolidge College.

▲ An article in *The Providence Journal* reporting on the RISD Basketball team placed next to an ad for the Providence Steamrollers. November 10, 1948



▲ ▼ The RISD Basketball team squares off against local teams. c. 1948



► RISD player Victor Koltun surrounded by Bryant College's team. c. 1949



Sadly, the “Burghoff-men” of the basketball team went 3–9 during their season, and yet support grew and both the school team and intramural league continued. That same year, RISD President Max Sullivan informed Student Association Director Gordon Allen that the RISD trustees “frown[ed] on organized athletics.” Regardless, more than thirty students formed a hockey team that same year. It will continue to be a mystery why the leadership of RISD challenged organized sports at almost every moment, but maybe the promise of rebellion against the institution is what helped keep the energy going and support among the student population so strong. A 1950 year-book stated “The only prerequisites are interest and enthusiasm. With these, the Athletic Association can become the most efficient, active organization in RISD.”

A water polo club at RISD was organized during the late 1940s, and softball and basketball intramural teams began their relationship with Hope High School as a generous host for the coming decades of RISD athletic history.

THE RISD GYM

During the summer of 1950, the Bank Building was officially converted into a gym for RISD students to use. Facilities for basketball, handball, volleyball, ping pong, and pool listed, with even showers available for sweaty art kids to use. During the 1951–52 school year, fifteen games were scheduled for the school’s team, with home games played at Hope High and practices held at the RISD Gym. Calls for support came from student newspapers, with one called *Spectrum* that urged students “We have the club. What we need is the support of the student body.”

The RISD basketball team seemed to have been well liked by many students, as the yearbook wrote about the team, saying “In the gym, legalized mayhem takes place as participants in various sports vie for floor space. Our basketball squad, overlooked by the National Invitation Selection Committee, played creditable ball all season. But in the last analysis, with people who smoke, it was pool, three to one.” Now imagine

▼ The 1949 RISD Basketball team. c. 1949



forcing these kinds of people to stop drinking and smoking for a whole season? No wonder the sport died out before.

Things became a little shaky during the spring of 1954 for the basketball team, as the Athletic Association was downgraded to the Athletic Committee, which now answered to the Student Association. The change was intended to de-emphasize the basketball team and promote intramural sports such as ping-pong, tennis, and badminton. The basketball team continued to play, with most interest coming from the Machine Design and Textile Engineering departments phased out during the 1960s. Judging by reports from school newspapers and yearbooks, it seems like RISD dissolved their school team, simultaneously leaving the Southern New England Coastal Conference Basketball League to focus on intramural play among the school’s

departments. In April of 1955 the boys league’s season began, with some of the players helping to coach a women’s team, who wore red shirts. During that same month, a championship game for the school’s intramural basketball league trophy was held at Hope High School. The school newspaper *Blockprint* mentioned that “the old RISD Intramural Basketball Trophy will be dusted off and awarded to the winning school division, who will also receive token pins”. The trophy had last been awarded to the Textile department way back in 1947, but would now be inscribed with the victor’s name and kept by them in their division office until the next season. Part of me hopes the trophy is now sitting in some old alum’s attic collecting dust but I’m sure it’s a rusty piece of scrap tin in a landfill somewhere in eastern Massachusetts by now.

The Industrial Design department would go on to win this hallowed trophy with a 78–45 victory over the Freshman team on May 5, 1955. The championship game was held at Hope High, as opposed to the RISD Gym where all previous games had been played. Many of the students who participated in the intramural league complained about the unorthodox conditions of the RISD Gym, especially those with “speed and natural stretch of the legs just right for and conditioned



▲ A RISD Basketball jersey,
courtesy of Bill Ewen 63 GD.
c. 1948



◀▶▶ Photographs and
illustration from the RISD
yearbook. c. 1950



by the usual large dimensions [of a court] have been finding the school gym a rather cramped area with the 10 players". A report on the game detailed Joe Nagle "the Irish Fireball" and Freshman Elliot Stone the "sparkplug" who was removed early from the game following a collision with Industrial Design's Bill Gamble. A writer for *Blockprint* noted:

▼ An illustration by Robert Barry from an issue of *Spectrum*, December 1951



"The two injured were taken to Roger Williams Hospital for four stitches each, on Stone's eyelid and Gamble's forehead. [...] Mr. [Gordon] Allen wishes to express his appreciation for the excellent job the Athletic Committee [Charles Brandreth, Peter Bradford, Ted Newburg, and Paul Bookbinder and company] have done in arranging the intramural basketball, badminton and tennis games this year. Never in the history of the Student Association has the money and equipment been used to the better benefit of such a large number of participants to the enjoyment of all."

THE INTRAMURAL GOLDEN AGE

The following school year, practice for basketball was held every day at the RISD Gym. With permanent access to their own home court, the future of basketball activity at RISD was now unfettered by the will of local organizations who may not have always welcomed the company of art school youths. At the same time, a new version of the women's team planned to form in the early months of the school year, as they hoped to play with a combination of men's and women's rules.

That spring, it was reported in *Blockprint* that former Freshman intramural star Elliot Stone and Bill Durfee planned to manage the basketball teams and handle scheduling once teams were organized. It appears around this time that RISD officially left the New England Coastal Conference, citing high costs and a lack of spectator attendance that confirmed that intercollegiate play was not in demand at the time. Instead, the Intramural league continued in early March, with six teams: Freshman A, Freshman B, Industrial Design C, Architectural Design D, Fine Arts E, and Fine Arts F. Some expressed disappointment in the teams organized, as they were mostly made up of freshman and sophomores, but at least half of the school seemed enthusiastic about another season of basketball play at RISD.



▲ Photograph of the team in the locker room, c. 1951

While games continued throughout March of 1956, so did standout performances and injuries to students who surely never signed a waiver. Sophomore Milt Kreischer on the "E" scored 21 in a 74–50 win over the "F" team. In an inter-freshman game, a student named "Kuzza" was taken out of the game with a cut eye. The most anticipated game of the first week of the season was between rivals Architectural and Industrial Design, with the latter emerging victorious following a four minute overtime, ending

with a score of 89–79. In another moment of history repairing itself, to this day Architecture and Industrial Design supply the RISD Balls with the most players. Maybe it's something genetic?

As great of a resource the RISD Gym was to the students of the 1950s and 1960s, it often became a source of tension among the many clubs and groups who fought over court space. There were times when students wishing to play badminton were turned away by basketball players who refused to give up court space, and other incidents where the "pool room and its occupants' behavior and language in the presence of women wishing to play pingpong" became the topic of discussion at Athletic Association meetings.

By mid April, the intramural league continued strong, with the Fine Arts E team at the top of the league. Due to attendance issues, the Industrial Design team was forced to forfeit two of their games, disqualifying them from the league. In an April 30 issue of *Blockprint*, it's reported that the Architectural Design team won the league championship following a short playoff run against the Freshman A and Fine Arts team.

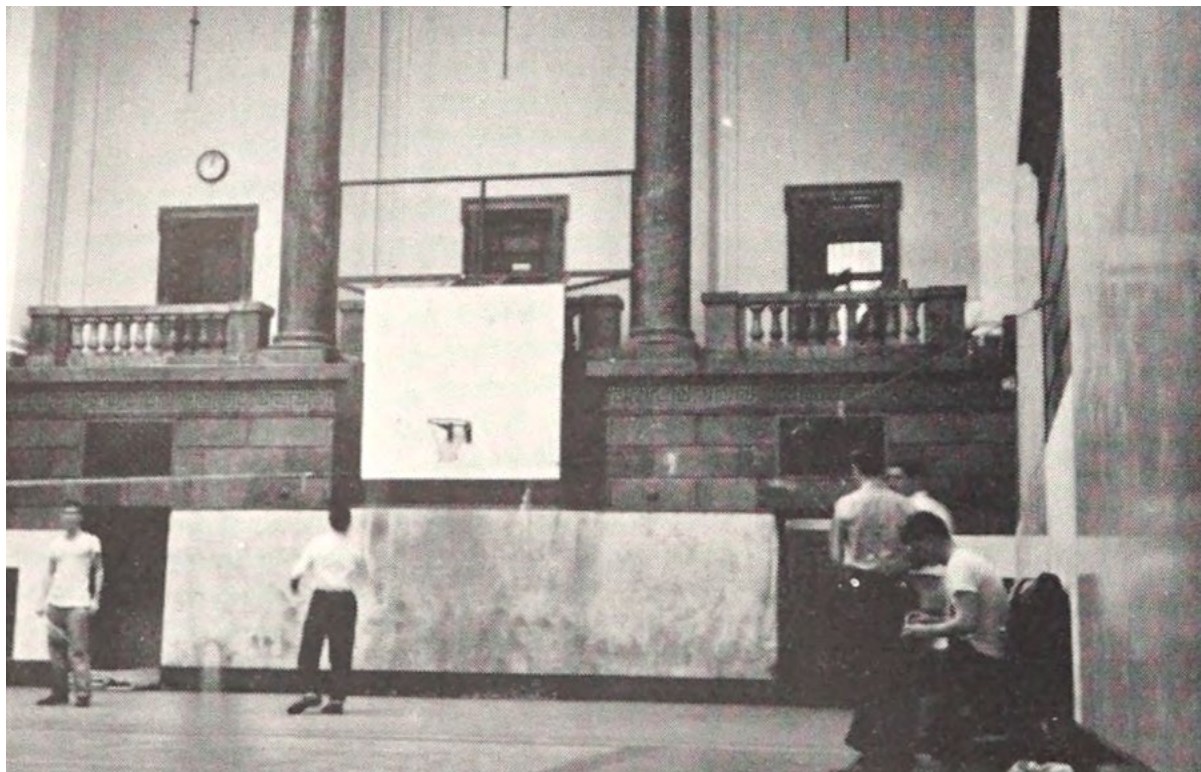
The following school year, an October 8 issue of *Blockprint* featured an article titled "We Have a Gymnasium", which detailed the still young and still struggling culture and history of sports at RISD. As the writer of the piece put it:

"Sports in this school, it would seem, have been, over past years, practically nonexistent. In past years there has usually been an intramural basketball league and posters will soon be on the bulletin board seeking players. At one time basketball here was intercollegiate but due to various difficulties it has now vanished."

Once again, the intramural league continued, this time beginning earlier than last year, with early games held following Thanksgiving Break. Several departments form their first teams, with Textile forming a group and Machine Design joining the Fine Arts team. The "Freshman Foundation" group continued to organize two separate teams, as they contained some of the most enthusiasm for the league and perhaps had nothing better to do. Games continued to be held at the RISD Gym, and there were many close games between the Industrial Design and Architecture teams, who traded victories back



◀▲► Photographs showing spaces around the RISD Gym, from showers, courts, and the billiards room. c. 1952



▲ A photograph of the court inside the RISD Gym, showing how it was built on to the preexisting structure of the People's Savings Bank. c. 1954

and forth throughout the season. One issue of *Blockprint* reported that the “high-flying” ID team defeated Architecture 73–66, but the following week an issue corrected the typo, stating that ID “had their flight interrupted by the Architects instead of conversely”. One can only wonder about the outrage among the Architecture department over this gross mischaracterization of their students’ skill. By the end of April, the Architecture team would go undefeated, winning nine straight games and the league championship. With two championships under their belt, the Architects were poised to begin their dynasty. This skill did not go unnoticed by the wider student population, who by the spring of 1957 began to wonder if RISD should begin playing local colleges again? RISD sports reporters write “Despite the usual complaints of blind referees and oval basketballs and glass covered baskets and..., the season showed some well played games and it is this reporter’s guess that a RISD basketball team could hold its own with many of the small colleges in the area”.

The next school year, ads were placed in the school newspaper, encouraging students to form teams and join the intramural league on a “divisional, departmental, or sectional basis”. Six teams were formed, but outside of Textile’s departure, they contained the same departments. Student attendance was reported as being higher than ever before, especially at a triple header where the reigning league champions, Architecture, were defeated after sixteen straight wins. A headline in *Blockprint* read: “Market House’s



◀ The RISD Basketball team facing off against Rhode Island College of Providence. c. 1955

► A photograph from *Blockprint* of an intramural game. March 26, 1956

▼ An Architecture intramural team faces the Freshman team in the RISD Gym. April 17, 1957



Mighty Maulers Strike Out”, detailing that both Architecture A and B teams were beaten by ID and the Freshman A teams respectively. For the first time since spring of 1955 the Architecture team lost, opening the way for a new dynasty. Over the next few months, the Freshmen won four straight, placing them at the top of the league, with Machine Design as the unfortunate bottom rung of the ladder at 0–4. Following in the footsteps of last season’s Architecture team, the Freshmen team went on to win all nine games of the season and mathematically clinch the championship, capped off by a victory against the Fine Arts team where four of their players scored at least 20 points. But, in yet another dramatic turn of events, the Architecture B team was scheduled to play the Freshman team the following week. In an event “that will go down alongside the fall of Troy” as one RISD sports reporter put it, the Freshman fell apart in a 64–54 loss. Despite clinching the league championship, the Architecture department still held bragging rights over the Freshman team as the only undefeated team in the history of the intramural basketball league. Bill Durfee, a senior in Architecture, who helped organize the rebirth of the league, scored 20 points in the victory and preserved his own unknown legacy of RISD basketball excellence.

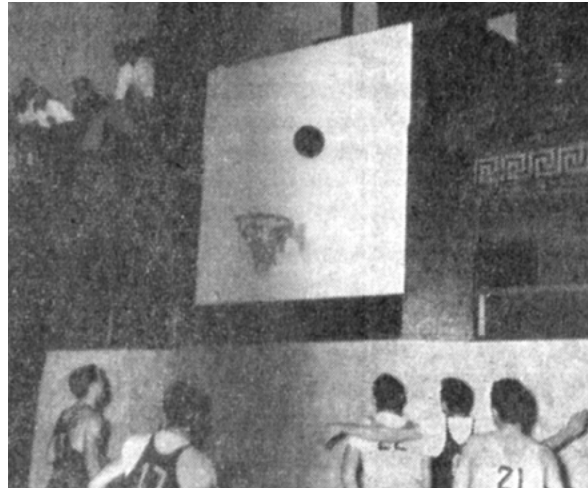
Enthusiasm only continued to grow during the 1958–59 season, helped by a refinished and repainted floor along with new basketball rims. In some yearbook photos from previous years, it is comical how large the backboard for these hoops were, and the haphazard padding strung right beneath it to shield from the solid stone wall less

than five feet from the baseline surely lead to some interesting play on fastbreaks. I can imagine these renovations were greatly appreciated by the intramural league and anyone else who used the court. Eight teams were organized that December for the intramural season, not many games were reported in the school newspaper, but from all accounts, the Architecture teams continued to dominate. No league champion was recorded from what can be found in the RISD Archives, and a slowly diminishing drip of basketball news in newspapers only foreshadowed the worst for the league. Next season, six teams played, but again, there is little information available about the scores, players, or championships of this time. Maybe they were reported in a form not well preserved by the RISD Archives? Or perhaps with many of the league’s original founders now gone, enthusiasm began to wane and many lost interest in playing within a league when they could just do pickup games with their friends.



JUST WHEN IT WAS GETTING GOOD

As further signs of end times, both Freshman teams seemed to struggle against their intramural opponents, so a lack of new talent may have been the reason for the end of the league as a whole? Then, out of nowhere, in a January 11, 1959 issue of *Blockprint*, it was reported that six RISD students: Libby, D'Amore, Ashcraft, Rich, Sheeran, and Cybolski, defeated Barrington College 68–64. The score and player names were the only thing recorded in the newspaper, with no other information about how the game was organized or if future ones against local colleges were planned. In yet another moment of student-initiated organization, it seemed that a small group of RISD students, perhaps growing tired of the monotony of the intramural league, began to plan an official school team. Soon, the year 1960 arrived. For the next ten years, both RISD and the rest of the country experienced a decade that left them forever changed. This period of rapid change extended to the RISD Basketball team, who no longer referred to themselves by their department, but rather one simple moniker: The Red Devils.



▲ Freshman and Fine Arts play in the RISD Gym. Photo by Kaya Oskal. February 25, 1957

▼ An illustration in *Blockprint*. September 22, 1958



► A photograph of intramural play in *Blockprint*. December 7, 1959



The basketball season gets off to a good start in the gym.

▼ The Freshman champions of the 1957–1958 school year. Photo by Hal Robinson. March 17, 1958



1961-1968

RISD NEEDS ATHLETIC SUPPORT

In October of 1960, plans to form a new RISD sports program were outlined with basketball practice beginning soon for a team organized by underclassmen. Interested students were told in the school newspaper to contact Harold “Percy” Persons for more information. By mid October, Bob D’Amoure was chosen as the Chairman of a new Athletic Association and continued to play on the school’s basketball team. Later that month, after further renovations were made to the RISD Gym, new basketballs and billiard equipment were also supplied for the space.

In November of 1960, a new iteration of RISD basketball was inaugurated at Barrington College. Though the RISD team was destroyed in a 92–45 blowout, the players remained in high spirits. One student, Bill “Steamboat” Ewen, who helped organize this version of the basketball team, ended the night with 0 points, but among the boxscore were names like Kibbe and Rajotte, who in the following years would become some of the core stars of the team. Surprisingly, the first



▲ The new RISD Basketball team faces Barrington College. With no uniforms, students wear their own shirts and shorts. November 13, 1960

ets of the RISD Gym before the tournament and used the jerseys worn by the school’s team back in the late 1940s. At Providence College they faced freshman and club teams from Brown, Bryant, and even Johnson and Wales, who wore jerseys with “CHEFS” printed on them.

In an example of how small the world is, and since the games were held at Providence College, members of their men’s team acted as referees. Players like Ray Flynn and Vinnie Ernst could be seen talking to RISD students during warmups and running down the court holding whistles. For those unfamiliar with 1960s Providence basketball history, just ten days after this tournament, Providence College would win their first NIT championship. During that time, the NIT held just as much prestige as the NCAA “March Madness” tournament does now, and when the team returned home from New York City, over ten thousand people gathered in downtown Providence to celebrate with them. Vinnie Ernst was a standout star during the 1961 tournament run, making numerous clutch shots and contributing to scoring outbursts in close overtime wins that propelled the team to the championship. But, at least to me, it’s fun to imagine that just a few weeks before, these college basketball stars were helping officiate games being played with a RISD team that didn’t even have their own uniforms yet.

game of this team’s existence was played before a formal practice was held, which was cited in *Blockprint* as an excuse for their unorganized play, alongside the fact that Barrington had their own cheerleaders and a large crowd. As stated by a writer in *Blockprint* “With the right team in there next time I’m sure the results will be different.”

In mid January, a schedule for the intramural league was published, with six teams competing, but as far as I could find, this was the last mention of the league during this time. Again, I believe it is possible that support for the league began to wane as other sports like hockey and even sailing drew attention from the student body. In conversations with a few of the men who played on the Red Devils team during the 1960s, they spoke about this period of RISD as lacking any kind of formal basketball outside of pickup games between class, so by this point the intramural league may have lacked the funding and organization from the rest of the school to both run efficiently and be well-attended by new students.

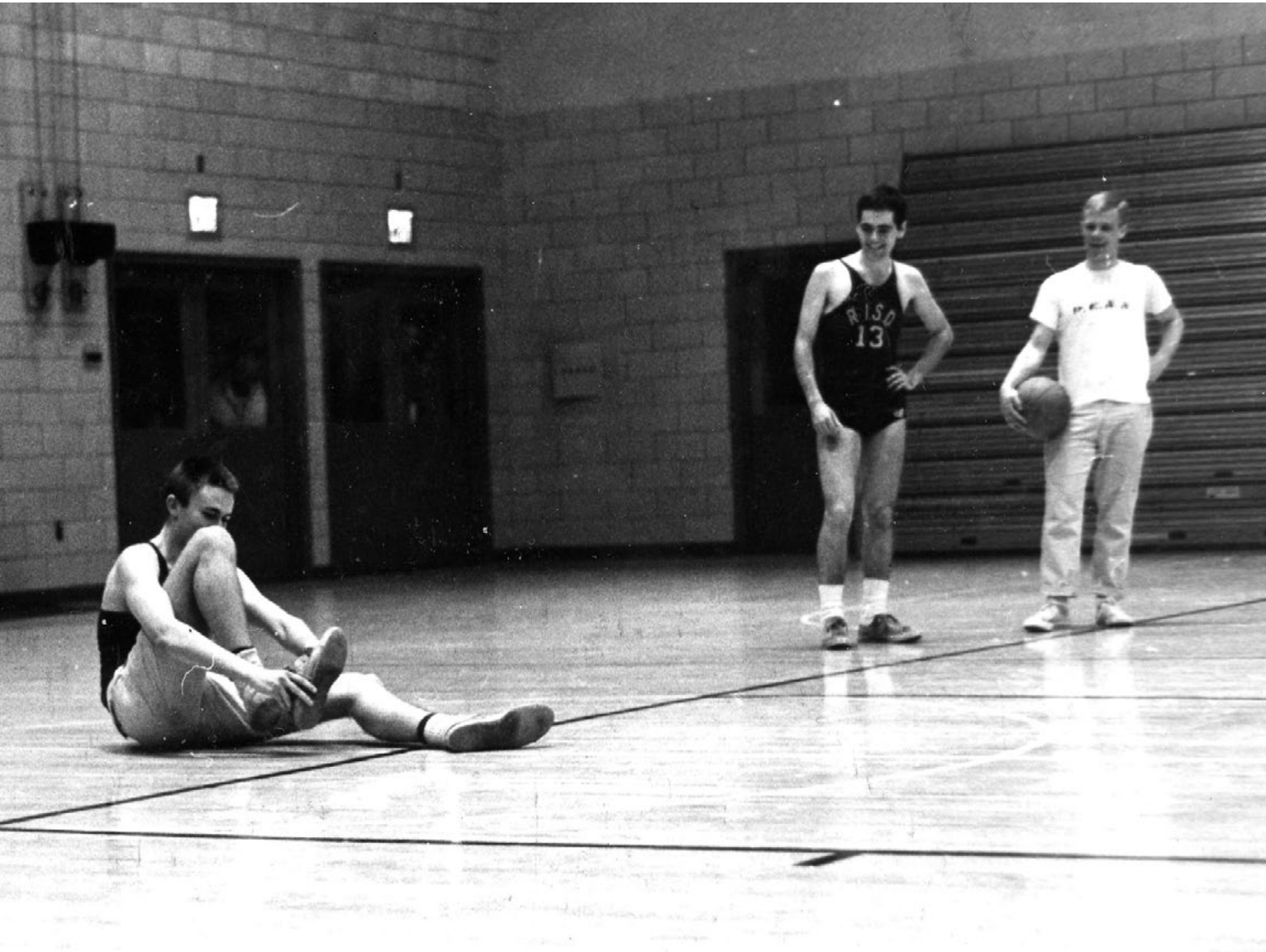
On March 14, 1961, the still-forming and still nameless RISD basketball team competed in an intramural basketball tournament held at Alumni Hall at Providence College. An ad placed in *Blockprint* invited boys interested in playing to report to the RISD Gym. Comparing the rosters to the Barrington game and future seasons, many of the same names participated, including Ewen, D’Amore, Kibbe, and Rajotte. Photos from the time show the RISD team in mismatched shorts, some with checkered patterns, as well as kneepads and a variety of Chuck Taylors. They wore jerseys that were old even for the time, as they raided the closets

That same school year, Hope High School won the Rhode Island state championship, going 26–0 and advancing to the New England Tournament where they lost in the semifinals to Wilbur Cross. As the RISD basketball team continued to grow, they would again turn to Hope High as their home atop College Hill.

THIS IS A BASKETBALL

The following October, a new section in *Blockprint* called “Sports Bump” was created. Lead by the fictional sportswriter Bump Hadley, an article poked fun at Providence College’s success from the previous season, saying that Bill Ewen and the rest of the team “turned down a bid to the National Invitation Tournament, holding out for feelers from the NCAA”. By early November, Tim Prout and Bill Ewen served as co captains for the team, organizing twelve teams in the Providence area and placed ads in *Blockprint* asking for interested players to come to the Gym. For the next several weeks, they faced Rhode Island College’s frosh (freshmen) team, Brown University’s frosh team, and Roger Williams Junior College. Unfortunately, the team would go on to lose all of these early games. But signs of school support were there, as a December 13 issue of *Blockprint* reported “The RISD basketball team needs support. In the last two games one could see a nucleus of enthusiasm very healthy for the school”. Students interested in joining the team halfway through the season

▼ Vinnie Ernst (right) speaks to RISD players before a game at Providence College. March 14, 1961



▲►▼ Various photographs of RISD's game against Johnson & Wales during the intramural tournament at Providence College. March 14, 1961





◀ RISD player Frank Kibbe (center) jumps for the ball as Bill Ewen (right) watches. March 14, 1961

O

THIS IS A BASKETBALL . . .

And it's reserved for you as a member of the **RISD Basketball Team!** Tim Prout and Bill Ewen, co-captains, have arranged matches with twelve teams in this area, and they need everyone interested in basketball to make up a RISD team.

Come to practice Thursdays, 7:00 p.m. and Saturdays, 10:00 a.m. in the RISD gym.

▲ Ad placed in *Blockprint*. The "basketball" is just standard "O" from a letterpress tray. November 1, 1961

were told to contact student Larry Appleton, who served as a kind of assistant coach to RISD faculty member Luther Eidam. Eidam had experience coaching basketball before coming to RISD so the team felt he was the right fit for the job.

Into 1962 the team continued to struggle in games, losing closely fought battles against Roger Williams and Johnson and Wales. By mid January, *Blockprint* referred to the team as the "Larry Appleton RISDites", now clad in new red and white uniforms with short sleeves and satin shorts. The jerseys were paid for using funding from the Student Activities Organization and made at the Boston Store, a clothing manufacturer with a location in Providence. Finally on January 13, 1962, the team notched their first victory with a 62-47 win over Calvin Coolidge College, a now closed university located in Boston. Later games were played against Bridgewater State's JV team and Bryant College, defeating the former and winning at least one against Bryant

during this time. One of the most impressive performances from this RISD basketball team came on February 14. The game was widely reported on within RISD and even local sports papers, partially due to the recent scoring outbursts of the 6'7" sophomore Frank Kibbe, who students called "Eel". In the last three games, he scored a total of 97 points, dropping 45 in the 83-65 victory over the "East Side All Stars", who I'm assuming were a team made up of especially talented high school players in East Providence. Following this performance, the team's record would improve to 5-3 with three straight victories.

The game was also covered in "Sports Bump" by Bump Hadley in what he called an "Armpit Hoop Loop Contest". Hadley referred to Kibbe as the originator of the

"three-handed set shot", Tim Prout as a "yeoman" rebounder, and Bill Ewen as a faithful, but scoreless, player-coach. Hadley closed his column with a tip for his student audience: "Keep your boy in sports and you'll keep him out of the courts".

The last game of the inaugural "Designers" basketball season was played on March 4 at Hope High against Calvin Coolidge College, ending in a 65-58 win where Frank Kibbe had yet another impressive scoring performance with 21 points. Larry Appleton decided to ditch the clipboard for a jersey for this season finale, but left with a goose egg in the scoring column. Local newspapers reported that the team won at least six games during the season, but *Blockprint* reported that they finished with an 4-8 record. Either way, the team celebrated their season, regardless of the record, with dinner at Johnson Hummocks Restaurant, a popular seafood restaurant on Allens Avenue. A team photo was published, featuring coaches Luther Eidam and

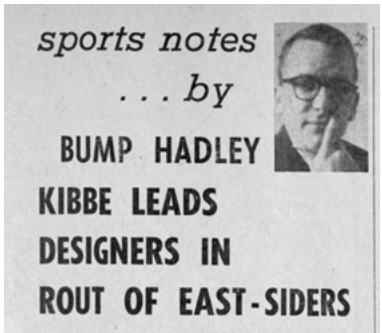
player-coach Larry Appleton alongside Zippy Zielin, Tim Prout, Frank Kibbe, John Cebrowski, Norm Rajotte, Dave Pressler, Tony Gelardi, Phil Francis, Bill Ewen, and Roger White. During a ceremony in May, Athletic Chairman Larry Appleton and Basketball Chairman Bill Ewen were praised by Gordon Allen among other student organizations.

A BRIGHT PROSPECT?

The next school year continued to be one filled with enthusiasm by new and returning players, as the team now featured sixteen players. The team was “bigger, faster, and in much better condition than last year’s squad”. Incoming freshmen Bruce Bockstael, Paul Blakeslee, Doug Plunkett, Rod Glaskell, Steve Kirk, Ole Peterson, Russ Benson, Rick Turner, and Wayne Sullivan were brought in an effort to fill in the gaps caused by graduation and Europe-bound Honors Student, Norman Rajotte.

Twelve games were again scheduled, with the first played on November 17 at Hope High against Calvin Coolidge College, unfortunately ending in a 62–47 loss attended by around two RISD student spectators. The season didn’t improve from there, as the team continued to lose games against Bryant College, Roger Williams Junior College, Barrington College, and Johnson and Wales. In a 67–57 loss to Byrant at Hope High, reportedly over 400 Bryant College students attend, while just two RISD students cheered the “Designer Netmen” on. By December 1962 the team began to be referred to in school newspapers as the “Artniks”, a moniker most likely used exclusively by *Blockprint* as none of the former players I spoke to ever remembered calling themselves that, preferring the “Red Devils” name that fit their fiery crimson shirts and salmon-colored shorts.

Frustrations with the team seemed to reach a tipping point during an especially brutal 91–58 loss to Roger Williams Junior College



▲ A piece by "Bump Hadley" in *Blockprint*. February 28, 1962

▼ The 1961–1962 team. Top row, left to right: Mr. Eidam, Zippy Zielin, Tim Prout, Frank Kibbe, John Cebrowski, Norm Rajotte, Larry Appleton. Bottom row, left to right: Dave Pressler, Tony Gelardi, Phil Francis, Bill Ewen, Roger White. April 25, 1962

which “saw RISD hoopers plagued by crits and homework”. Frank Kibbe had to exit the game early due to an apparent knee injury, and, according to RISD sportswriters, “excuses [were] made of homework, study hours, too few practice sessions, ego coaching, and nervous players”. The team was made fun of at one point, as spectators observed how:

“Toward the end, scoring was done by the RISD squad only when they became angry or frustrated; then they ran fast and hard, dribbled expertly, and shot well (It’s a shame they didn’t get mad earlier).”

In January 1963, things continued to fall apart, as RISD student and writer for *Blockprint* Rik Gobeille wrote a piece titled “Designer Hoopsters Erased in Last Four Contests”. Two days after returning from Christmas break, they faced the Radron Squadron II team from Quonset Naval Air Station and were destroyed 90–47. During that game, Gobeille wrote:

“With minutes left in the game and the score closing slightly our Coach yelled, ‘Slow down!’ We did; they didn’t; we lost, 90 to 47. Next time? Who knows?”



▲ The 1962–1963 team. Top row, left to right: Luther Eidam, Wayne Sullivan, Russell Benson, Bruce Bockstael, Paul Blakeslee, William Ewen, Larry Appleton. Bottom row, left to right: Timothy Prout, Douglas Plunkett, Frank Kibbe, Roderick Gaskell, David Kaufholz. November 14, 1962

Other games against Barrington College and Johnson and Wales were played with the latter featuring “unbelievably bad refereeing [that] left no doubt in our minds that referee John Heislin needed contact lenses just to see his glasses. It was so bad that spectators took our side in screaming against ‘bad calls’”. The team also faced the Davisville Seabees, a naval construction base in Davisville, Rhode Island, losing a close game that went into overtime.

The 1962–63 season couldn’t end soon enough, with the last game held at Hope High against Bryant College on February 28. The RISD team was again defeated and ended the season going 0–14, a record that would surely ruin the future of any other college basketball team, but the RISD team still kept some hope. Players and students blamed the lack of commitment from some of the team as most games only featured around seven of the original sixteen players who signed up for the team, leading to great first halves, but embarrassing second half runaways. Despite all of this misfortune, RISD students still found time to make fun of everyone, including themselves. Rik Gobeille referred to Bryant’s “volcanic” coach as someone with a constantly reddened face and always close to heart failure. Albert Bush-Brown, President of RISD during this time, also attended the game with his wife. Faculty member Donald Sheppard and his wife also hosted the players at their home after the unfortunate 70–52 loss, licking their wounds and enjoying sandwiches,



◀▶▶ Various games at Hope High School, Providence College, and practice at the RISD Gym. c. 1962–1963

cake, cookies, and loaded cider. All RISD spectators praised the performances of the team, who led at halftime 28–25, but lacked the conditioning and numbers to truly sustain any kind of lead.

FORGET ABOUT LAST YEAR

Players and writers alike were eager to put last season’s performance behind them, as Rik Goebille wrote:

“Last year’s luckless basketball scores echo through the hollow hallways of our esteemed players’ craniums. Though, for all our surfacey bad looks, the Artniks glistened with sweat as our sparse spectators were treated to some of the most exciting and frantic battles this writer has ever seen on any court.”

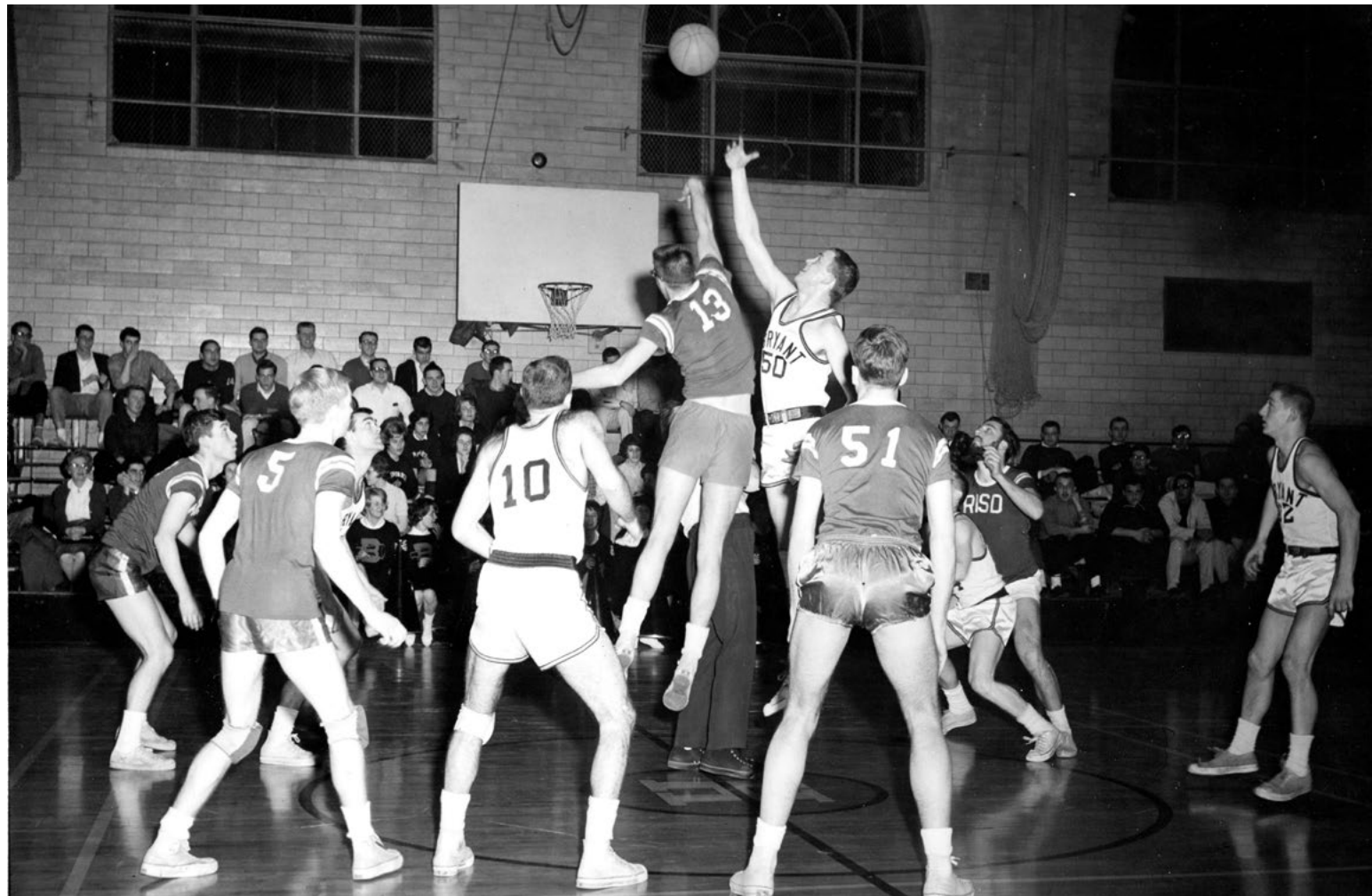
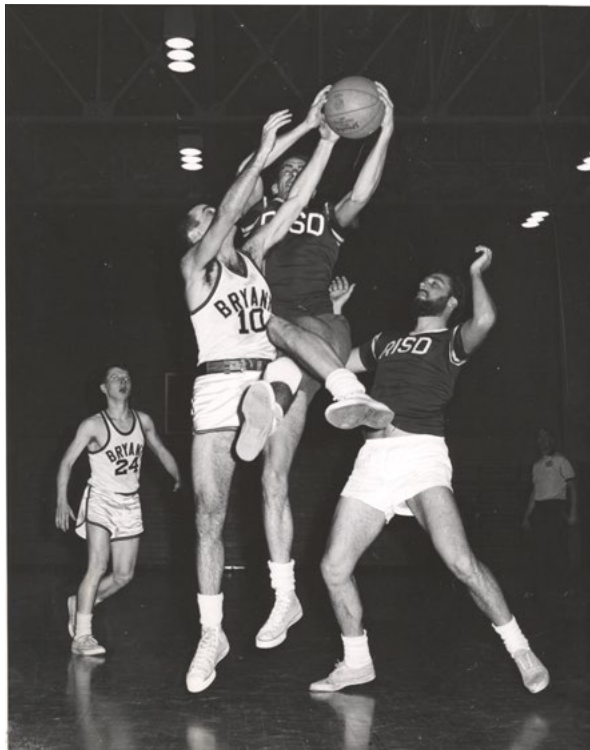
Again complaints were made about low student attendance and small team rosters as the reasoning behind the trounces, but Larry Appleton continued to “plead” for new students to try out, with home games planned to be played at both Hope High School and Mount Pleasant High School. Practices were held twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday nights in the RISD Gym, except a short period in October when the space was used for an architectural exhibition, so the team practiced at Hope High for a time as well.

Eleven games were scheduled against many of the same opponents from last year’s campaign, with the season opener held on November 20 against the Davisville Seabees. The team featured familiar faces along with newcomers Leon Chatelain, Pat Brady, Ronny Russo, John Fairchild, Al Cornell, and Jack Schleyer, totaling around thirteen fulltime players and being coached by Larry Appleton and recently graduated Bill Ewen, with Luther Eidam exiting. A crowd of around 150 gathered for the first game against the Seabees. Dan Paul was a good scorer for the team in the beginning but the play

▼ The RISD community attends a game against Bryant at Hope High School. Bottom row, second from left: President Albert Bush-Brown. Fourth from right: Mrs. Sheppard, Secretary of the Student Association Office. Far right: Gordon Allen, head of the Student Association. February 28, 1963



► Doug Plunkett jumps for the ball during a game. February 28, 1963



◀▲ Photos by Lars N. Lundin.
February 28, 1963

soon became sloppy and Davisville pushed ahead by three at the end of the first half. The game then went into overtime and ended in a 67–66 loss, with a heartbreaking missed game-winning shot. Regardless, the team put a spot in Blockprint to thank the cheerleaders who showed their support during the game. The next few games were likely losses to Bryant and Berkshire Christian College, and a rematch against Bryant was bitterly remembered by Rik Goebille, who covered the “depressing” 128–62 loss and bluntly wrote:

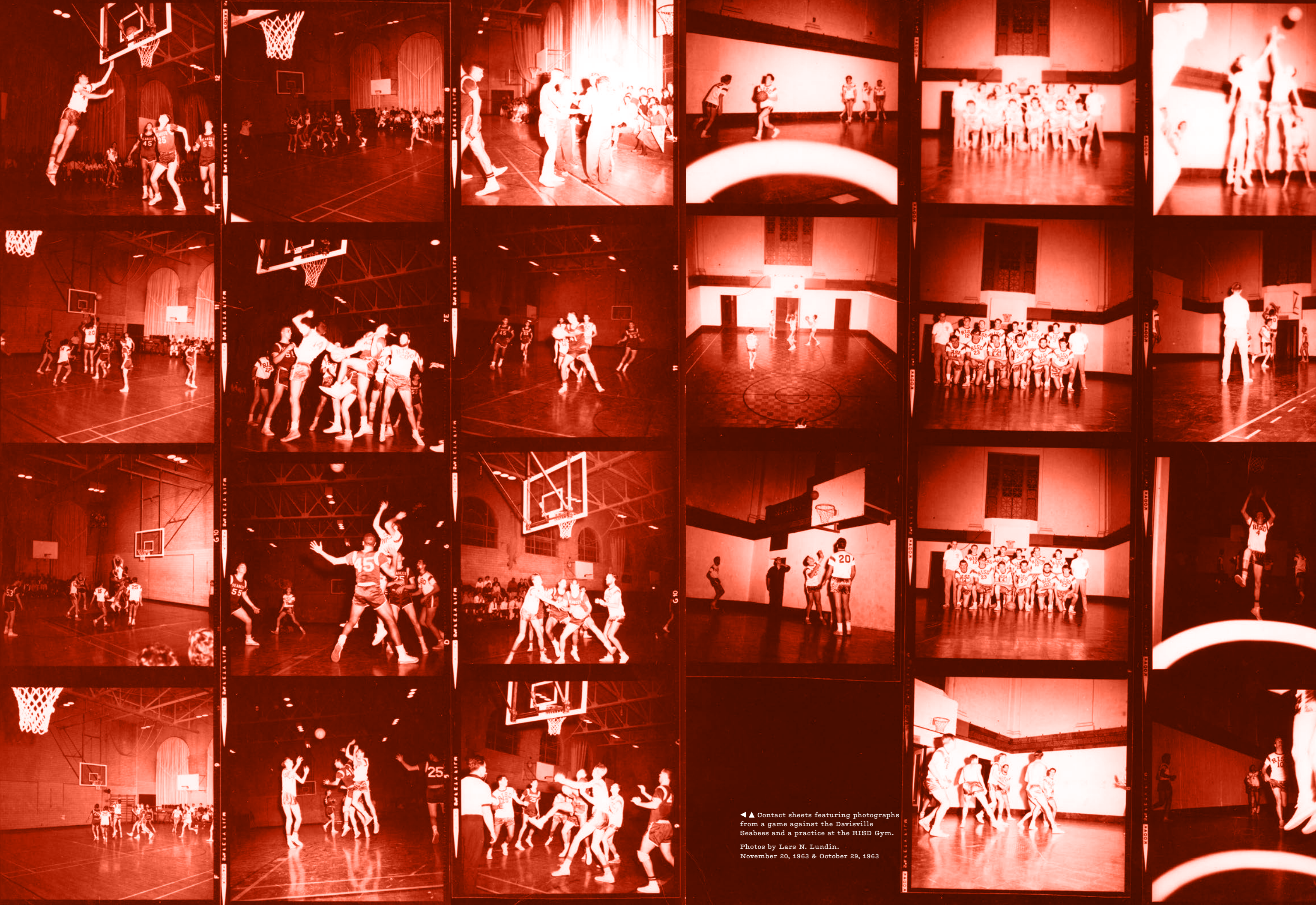
“If there is any doubt as to who won [...] they are deaf, dumb, or blind. It seems that Bryant considers their victory something of a monumental achievement. Maybe they feel that their whole team will soon come down with a bad case of broken legs and are just looking to beef up their egos.”

Following another loss to the Seabees in January, the team welcomed a new coach named Raymond Wilson. Apparently Wilson was a three sport college athlete, studied business administration, and dropped out early to pursue a professional boxing career. I really cannot tell who this guy was and if he was even real, since I don’t think any of the players I spoke to remembered him. The story continues to get weirder in a piece in *Blockprint*, as Wilson’s only defeat in boxing was to a “pert young Ohio girl, who married him”. After moving to Providence, Wilson played on the Benefit Street Recreation Center Adult League Basketball Team and worked as a beautician and hair stylist at Kay’s Beauty Salon and singer at a local night-spot. Was this guy real? Or was it just another Bump Hadley situation? I’ll leave that up to you to decide.

Maybe he was real, as the team won two out of their next three games, beating Calvin Coolidge College 55–54 and Roger Williams 66–55, the latter featuring a 25 point performance from constant scoring machine Frank Kibbe. An ad for the March 8 season finale against Bryant College was shared in *Blockprint*, featuring a photo of a player from the team with weird shapes and art supplies painted all over his body. Art school, I guess? The game ended in a 112–89 loss, but just like the previous season, a party was held for the players at Donald Sheppard’s home. Raymond Wilson was mentioned once again and credited for pulling “the Artnicks out of the cellar and into the respect of the other teams and coaches”, so I guess he was a real guy and just had the most interesting life of all time. A scrimmage



▲ The 1963–1964 Basketball team. October 29, 1963



◀▶ Contact sheets featuring photographs from a game against the Davisville Seabees and a practice at the RISD Gym. Photos by Lars N. Lundin. November 20, 1963 & October 29, 1963



▲ The 1963-1964 Basketball team. October 29, 1963

was held against Brown University's club team later that month and Raymond Wilson reportedly participated in playing on the court with the rest of the team.

Following this season, both Larry Appleton and Bill Ewen left, and each were awarded with a commemorative plaque paid for by the team and some money for Bill that went towards his wedding planned soon after. March 11, 1964 is also an important date because it was the day that *Blockprint* featured an ad placed by the basketball team thanking the RISD community "for your support". The ad featured old woodcut illustrations of childbirth aid devices and may have been one of the earliest innuendo jokes associated with the RISD basketball team. Before the Balls or even the Nads earned their names, the Red Devils/Artniks had their own dirty jokes.

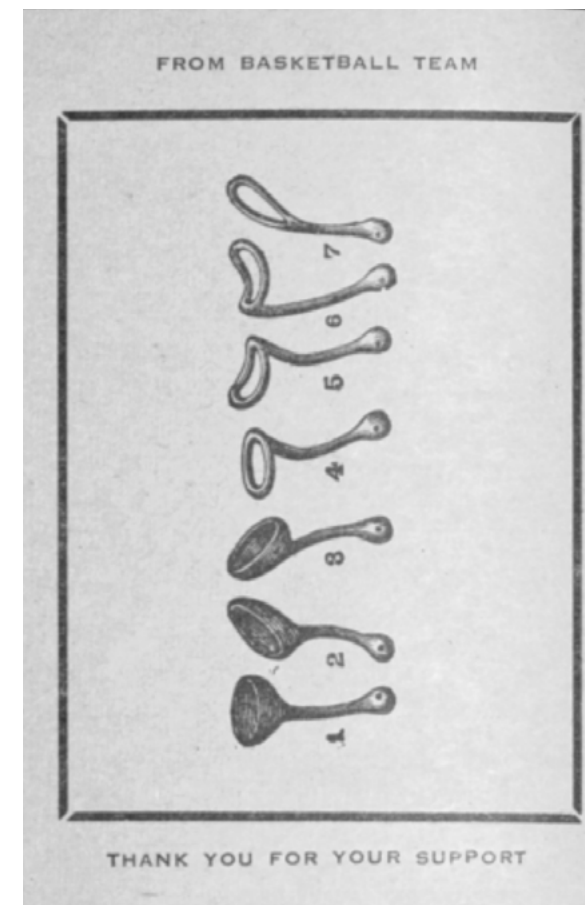
LESS AND LESS

With the departure of Bill Ewen and Larry Appleton the season prior, it became clear that even this iteration of RISD basketball would soon come to an end as each founding member of the team

graduated and moved on. Over the coming 1964-65 school year, individual games and final scores were reported on less and less, due in part to Rik Goebille no longer contributing pieces to *Blockprint*'s sports section. He was a senior in the Illustration department at the time, so senior-itis mixed with thesis stress may have pushed that hobby out of daily life. The team's main photographer, Lars Norman Lundin, also graduated the previous year, so even less photos of games were consistently shared and published in school newspapers.

Some games during that season were still reported on in the Providence Journal, including a December 12 loss to Johnson and Wales 118-77. On January 10 the RISD team faced MassArt for the first time at Johnston High School Gym, but the results of that game were never published. The same hap-

pened for a January 15 game against MIT's Freshman team at MIT. On January 20 the Red Devils managed to defeat the Davisville Seabees 80-68 thanks in large part to the 21 point scoring contribution of newcomer Clark Bartell. At least one other game was held in mid February against Johnson and Wales at Hope High School, but yet again it seemed that both interest and enthusiasm for the team was slowly beginning to wane and with it the death of yet another version of RISD basketball would soon come.



▲ The basketball team thanks the RISD community in *Blockprint*. March 11, 1964

CHANGE OF PACE

The following 1965–66 school year became another period of turmoil among both the student body and athletic teams. Support from the RISD community dipped even more, and with the Vietnam War underway, fears of the draft may have contributed to less and less interest in extracurricular activities. Around this time the team stopped practicing at the RISD Gym, now being forced to practice and play games exclusively at Hope High. By the end of the decade the Gym would be converted into a painting studio, so it is possible that around this time that renovations were already underway, but there are little to no records of when these spaces shifted hands and departments.

In an October 25 issue of *Blockprint*, fellow student Barry Kushner, serving as Athletics Chairman, personally urged the student newspaper to cover more athletics events. Even though I'm reading all of this sixty years after the fact, I could tell how devastating this lack of coverage by *Blockprint* was to general interest for any sports teams at RISD. In the same issue, a piece by Peter Whitely titled "Change of Pace", ripped into the student body for their ignorance and lack of interest in student activities, a sentiment I surely still feel to this day. I'll let Whitely's words speak for themselves:

"Unbeknownst to the majority of the student body, there is a small group of students who have dared break out of the rigid bonds imposed by the crystal ball of RISD. Ten male students have once again banded together in an attempt to play basketball, an effort which has been greeted by the usual nonchalance and apathy of the rest of the students. If any of the RISD student-body would dare be seen at something as other-worldly as a basketball game, they will certainly enjoy themselves, and maybe even help the team."

Despite this apathy, the basketball team, in whatever rough state it was in at the time, managed to defeat Providence A.C. 80–38, though I doubt their skill level after so much noise had been made about the disorganized state of the team. It's unclear if the team even had a coach during this time, maybe Raymond Wilson flew away?

On November 13, 1965 the team continued their winning streak, beating their longtime opponent Roger Williams Junior College 73–67. Freshman Joe Cooke, who had attended a five week foundations studies program at RISD during the previous summer, was the lead scorer with 22 points. On November 30 the team lost to Berkshire Christian College 76–66, yet Cooke still managed to have a 22 point outburst. Then on December 7 the RISD team, now officially referred to in *The Providence Journal* as the "Red Devils" beat the Seabees 73–64. According to *Blockprint* the game was the first time the team

▲ A scribbled-over photo of Mac Collins, featured in *Blockprint*.
March 14, 1964

had played at full strength in two weeks, as Bill Gray led scoring with 17. Student writers reported “It was a controlled ball game in which RISD dominated from the tip-off, and the balanced attack easily subdued the forces of the Navy”. Around this time the Red Devils began to grow their winning streak, and many hoped this recent publicity and momentum would help bring back some of the fans they had been sorely missing.

Three days later the team continued their streak, defeating Barrington College’s junior varsity team 75–72. Joe Cooke had his most impressive performance to date, leading scoring with 35. On December 17 the team played another game against Rhode Island Junior College, ending their win streak with a 78–61 loss that featured another 25 point output from Joe Cooke, who was referred to as “Tom Cooke” in *The Providence Journal*. After Christmas Break, the team must have been a little rusty as they lost to Davisville 82–71, but Joe Cooke had yet another scoring performance with 24 points as the Red Devils’ season record dropped to 4–5. Another game was also played against the Quonset Flyers around this time, but no final score was shared. A February 4, 1966 loss to Roger Williams Junior College 77–67 was only made worse by a February 15 loss to Rhode Island Junior College 93–79, but Joe Cooke was still able to put up 20 and Mac Collins scored 25, cementing themselves as stars of the team, despite their team’s record. It’s reported in one issue of *Blockprint* in late February that the team’s record was at least 3–8, but a writer states “Next year promises a regular schedule of practice and games—if anyone will dare to make contact with this slick powerhouse of high-voltage pluggers”.

Despite Barry Kushner’s efforts, it seemed that coverage of sports in *Blockprint* did not improve during the previous season, and future years were no different. It especially didn’t help that for many RISD students, including star Red Devils player Joe Cooke, their academic student deferment ran out and they were drafted into the army. I was able to speak with Joe in person about his experience on the team and the shock that came with realizing he wouldn’t be able to finish his time at RISD. He wished to study graphics but instead was drafted by the United States military to help in the war in Vietnam. I don’t want to go on a tangent about the Vietnam War and its relation to college students and especially RISD students, as that could be its own entire project, but when I spoke with Joe he put it quite simply. “It was a time of great anxiety” he told me, “I had never even heard of Vietnam before, I had such a limited understanding of geography”. For these young men, they just wished to go to college and pursue a degree in art or design. Maybe they wanted to play some basketball too and get on with the rest of their lives, but often the world around them had other plans.

LAST LEGS

The 1966–67 season appears to have been the last organized season of basketball at RISD during this brief but bright moment in the history of the sport at the school. There was still some reputation of the team among the student body, as an October 10 issue of *Blockprint* published a list of common questions from new students at RISD, which included: “why is our basketball team called the Red Devils?” *The Providence Journal* reported on a 82–55 loss to Rhode Island Junior



▲ Clark Bartell puts up a shot against the Seabees. January 27, 1965



▲ Mac Collins puts up a hook shot. c. 1966

College on January 9, 1967 and a 92–89 victory over Western New England College on February 28, but no other games were mentioned in either local newspapers or RISD newspapers for the rest of the school year.

As just a fun little sports sidenote, RISD was able to field a football team in November of 1966 and faced off against a medium security prison in Cranston, winning 7–0. No photos of the game exist although I really wish they did.

In a February 13, 1967 issue of *Blockprint*, editor in chief at the time Mike Tylick wrote a bizarre article criticizing the hippie culture of the time and likewise the corrupt structure of the Student Activities Organization. For the past twenty years or so, *Blockprint* served as a look into the zeitgeist of RISD culture, and has become one of the most important resources for researching the history of some of these basketball teams. However, around this time it seemed that the newspaper had an identity crisis, along with the rest of the country, and became a compact news magazine that experimented with layout and content much more than the cookie cutter days of the early 1950s. This piece by Tylick is one such prime example, as it is less news or any kind of report about events around RISD, and reads more like the rambling ranting of a disgruntled upperclassmen angry with unappreciative freshmen and the RISD institution at large.

Tylick mentioned in his article how studio classes at RISD have begun to decrease workloads to allow more space for extracurriculars, but he thinks “most people are using this spare time to watch television drink or to indulge in the two favorite hippy indoor sports, playing it cool and feeling sorry for yourself”. One can imagine Tylick sitting at his typewriter the week before, angrily writing down everything he hates about RISD, realizing that he can’t change the system, and I don’t really blame him. Despite my joking, it is eerie how similar some of his gripes are to my own with campus organizations that will go unnamed for now. “It takes twenty minutes to obtain a requisition for a box of paper clips” he writes at one point, upset that the Student Activities Organization would much rather do tried-and-true fundraising than experiment with any fun activities for students. Tylick does cross a line slightly for me when he starts mentioning cliques, continuing “It seems that everybody in this school is either a leader, or more likely, a follower in the little cliques that abound at RISD” which included sports clubs like basketball. I believe this frustration is in part due to the slow death of *Blockprint* itself and jealousy that his club wasn’t as popular as others, which may be the reason why the basketball team had not been well covered in years prior. Tylick continued:

“Out of 1005 students at RISD, only 3 sophomores have applied for the editorship of BLOCKPRINT. The three active members of The Fine Arts Society have been forced to liquidate the club because no one else cared about it, while the hockey team has prime ice time at Brown, the basketball team practices every night in the gym, the wrestling team has purchased new mats, and the Newman Club holds mass each Sunday in the upper Refectory. I admire these groups for their ambition, but shouldn’t a little more of it be directed towards largely inactive and non-functioning professional organizations?”

Within the same issue of *Blockprint*, Tylick also wrote an article for the hockey team, an early version of what would become the Nads, saying:

"Go to the next hockey game. It is much more fun than either a Student Council Meeting where a lot of people show up to make asses of themselves, or any TAB musical comedy could ever hope to be".

DEATH OF BASKETBALL

This odd feud between *Blockprint* and the basketball team at RISD continued into the 1967–68 season, with another strange piece by the new editor in chief Ronn Spencer. His rant is so beautiful I will just include the whole thing here:

"If you think that American Middle Class banality is some sort of accident you're sadly mistaken. There are plenty of well-organized institutions that mold "our young people" into average, compromising clods. You're in one right now be it RISD, Brown, or some other "respected" institution of higher learning. Sure, most colleges have a "liberal" atmosphere but most people have set behavioral patterns when they arrive and their new found freedom is rarely exercised to the fullest. The American high school, operating under the assumption that well-rounded people make the best citizens are churning out college hopefuls that are as acceptable as Pepsi-Cola and are committed to nothing more than carving their own little niche in our sick society.

"I remember when my high school guidance counselor told me I'd have a rough time getting into the "college of my choice." All I knew was that this same guy told our whole goddamned freshmen health and guidance class that horizontal striped clothes made you look fatter and vertically striped thinner and taller. Not being very interested in making myself more appealing I made a practice of never listening to him very much. However, I did manage to get into the "college of my choice" thereby escaping Vietnam, a lifetime career as a Jersey gas station attendant, and a social strata that was comprised primarily of jocks, good time Charlies, pep rallies, and guys that played locker room games like "soap your ass and slide around the shower-room floor." I deluded myself into thinking that RISD would be some sort of Mecca - an escape from the high school mentality of school spirit for school spirit's sake. A few weeks revealed Mecca to be vastly better than high school but a lot less than a Mecca should be.

"Let's take a quick inventory of but a few things at RISD. We have now a farcical reactionary, Mickey Mouse Student Council that is bogged down in petty politics,



▲ Joseph Cooke (center) takes a shot during a game. February 28, 1966

takes most of its "direction" unchallenged from Mr. Gordon Allen of the SAO, and whose primary function is to dole out money to various RISD clubs, fellowships, and organizations. We have a supposedly powerless Publications Committee which "oversees" Blockprint. This standing committee of the Student Council is always ready to agree that Blockprint should be a "fully independent" school newspaper so it is strange indeed that their history is one of censorship, manipulation, and recommendations for stricter control over this "irresponsible" publication. In a relatively short time this nebulously powered committee has increased its power from an advisory committee to an organization that chooses and fires Blockprint editors and seizes every opportunity to "strongly urge" editorial policy.

"We have a basketball team (the "Red Devils") that is trying to instill some sort of "school spirit" through a series of crudely executed fliers and posters proclaiming "RISD WON," "Signs of Creeping Big Ten-ism?" and "See RISD win. Win, RISD win." (Thank you Dean Reutlinger for coaching the team, taking an interest, and providing those physically oriented with an outlet for their desires but is the "corn" really necessary?) "There is now in the works a Friday night refectory gathering with the title of "Coffee House" that can only lead to an eventual "Beatnik Dance" where everyone will come imitating Kerouac. Homer Hall itself has turned into a nightly carnival of little gatherings with nuzzling, hand holding, and couples stealing fond embraces.

"Perhaps all this shows a definite trend at RISD. It just might be that we are getting in on the beginning of a metamorphosis from which RISD will someday emerge a "college" complete with frat parties, full dorm facilities, plastic people, plastic conversations, and wall to wall American sterility. God help us..."

I won't even try to put my own words to the student culture of RISD at the time and how the basketball team fit into that weird puzzle, because I think this single piece of writing does that job for me perfectly. In a December 4 issue of *Blockprint*, the two warring groups of magazine writers and basketball players must have reached a ceasefire because a detailed schedule is published for all of the games planned for that season. Granted, no scores of these thirteen games were ever recorded in *Blockprint*, but the information is at least appreciated. Opponents included many of the same from previous years and home games continued to be played at Hope High School and Mount Pleasant High School from mid November to late February of 1968.

That entire *Blockprint* issue is very strange, as it featured another ranting letter from Ronn Spencer detailing the hectic night before where the entire magazine was put together. Struggling to find anyone to write for *Blockprint*, he states "I'll be nice to everyone and

even print the Basketball and Hockey schedules or anything else we get ‘cause what the hell nobody even cares this week”, so maybe sports and Blockprint were still at war outside of this one issue. The piece also included the great line:

“We work our asses off all year for you people JUST SO YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT — think of it — if not for us there’d only be the administration, the weather, and the War in Vietnam to bitch about and what the hell would you read at lunch or in the snack bar”.

But as promising as another full season of basketball may have seemed, it appears that the team collapsed some time after Christmas Break, as a February 12, 1968 issue of *Blockprint* featured an article titled “The Timely Death of the Basketball Team”. As the anonymous student wrote:

“That ill-fated child of misfortune so sadly misplaced, need not be mourned by those who fear that complete death of sports, lust and school spirit here at RISD. That banner so proudly borne last spring by the Crystal Tap Soccer Team is now being carried to new triumphs by the RISD... HOCKEY TEAM!!!!

“It is the best of sports for people who generally hate sports [...] You can scream off your head, get drunk, stay calm, hold hands or anything, and no one but those blinded with the lust for victory could fail to enjoy it.”

In a conversation with Cornelis de Boer 70 BArch, he told me that the team only played five games during the 1967–1968 season, but had to forfeit the remainder of the schedule due to a lack of participation. As he put it, the team, along with the rest of the youths at RISD, were “caught up in the revolution of our times” and were likely engaged in much more important political or recreational activities. At least the young Nads team stuck around to help fill in that gap left by basketball at RISD for the time being.



► A RISD basketball game schedule shared in *Blockprint*. December 4, 1967

RISD BASKETBALL SCHEDULE			
Practice Sessions at Hope High School — 8:30-10:30p.m.			
Wed.	Nov. 1		
Tues.	Nov. 7		
Thurs.	Nov. 9		
Tues.	Nov. 14		
Thurs.	Nov. 16		
GAMES 1967			
*Mass. College of Art	Fri., Nov. 10	Hope High School	8:30 p.m.
Roger William College	Mon., Nov. 27	Roger Williams College	8:00 p.m.
Berkshire Christian College	Fri., Dec. 1	Lennox, Mass.	8:00 p.m.
Quonset Air Station	Mon., Dec. 4	Quonset	8:00 p.m.
Johnson & Wales (J.V.)	Sat., Dec. 9	Johnston High School	6:30 p.m.
Davisville Sea Bees	Mon., Dec. 11	Davisville, R. I.	8:00 p.m.
1968			
R. I. Junior College	Wed., Jan 3	Walsh Gym (RIC)	6:30 p.m.
Mass. College of Art	Sat., Jan. 13	YMCA, Huntington Ave., Boston	7:30 p.m.
*Johnson & Wales (J.V.)	Tues., Jan. 16	Johnston High School	8:00 p.m.
*Quonset Air Station	Thurs., Jan. 18	Hope High School	8:00 p.m.
*Davisville Sea Bees	Thurs., Feb. 1	Hope High School	8:30 p.m.
*R. I. Junior College	Thurs., Feb. 15	Hope High School	8:30 p.m.
*Roger Williams College	Mon. Feb. 19	Mount Pleasant High School	8:00 p.m.
*Our Home Games			

► Team photo. Standing, left to right: Barry Kushner, Joseph Cooke, Clark Bartlett, Bill Grey, Mac Collins, John Dilg, George Delaney, Cornelis de Boer. Kneeling, left to right: Bruce Bockstael, David Gregory. February 1966





▲ Tim and his cool facial hair.
October 29, 1963

An interview with...

Tim Prout 65 ID

Tim Prout was the first of the “Red Devils” squad that I was able to track down and interview. As I dug around old film photos in the RISD Archives, I was struck by this guy with such an impressive ‘stache, and had to speak with him. After a few email exchanges and a rough explanation of my ideas for this project, he agreed to have a call with me. Though we only spoke over the phone and didn’t speak face to face, merely hearing the stories he had to share gave me a boost of confidence in what I was doing. Despite having graduated over sixty years ago, there are some memories time can’t erase.

RYAN SCOTT

Before you arrived at RISD, had you played on any other basketball teams or other organized sports teams before?

TIM PROUT

Not in high school. I went to a really big high school and I wasn’t a good enough athlete to compete with the real athletes, but I went to a small community college—I guess it was called a junior college then—in southern Illinois, where I grew up. I grew up near Chicago. That school had a team that I was a part of for a couple of years. I played baseball there as well, so I had some team experience.

Then I was accepted into RISD. I’m not sure how this whole team got started, why we started, whose idea it was—I’m not sure—but I know a few of the players in that picture you sent me. Dan Paul, the one next to me there in the center, had played professional Double-A baseball, so he was a good athlete. Other guys had experience too, like Frank Kibbe. I have no idea what his previous experience was, but we managed to be somewhat competitive. Not always, but we had fun.

So we practiced in what used to be a bank. The inside space was barely larger than a basketball court. We played the games up at Hope High.

We had a staff person. I don’t think he was a

teacher, but he was part of the administration and guided us around, so to speak. We also had a bus that we drove to places in. I have no idea where the bus came from, or even who drove it, but we went off fairly far to play games. We never stayed anywhere overnight, the other teams were usually within a few hours.

RS

I saw you were co-captain with Bill Ewen one year. What were the challenges of leading a basketball team made up of art students?

TP

[Laughs] I don't know how we spread the word, but some of the players were good. I was not a great athlete, but I did okay. I scored a few baskets here and there and we occasionally won a game, but usually we weren't really competitive. We'd go down to the Navy base in Davisville and play. It was a Seabees base I believe.

Our girlfriends, who later became our wives, would come to the games and cheer us on. There were never many people there.

RS

You also played the Quonset Flyers, a team from another Navy station?

TP

Yeah we did play them. They weren't great teams, but it was fun to go. We got to eat in their big cafeteria after the game. [Laughs]

RS

Student newspapers at the time mention a season where the team went 0-14 on the season. What was team morale like during that stretch?

TP

We just played. We knew we weren't that great, and we usually were not winning. I don't remember ever being concerned. We just wanted to play and do something and get some exercise. We knew we weren't a top notch team by any means.

RS

What do you remember about the volunteer who helped run the team with Larry Appleton as being both the coaches and leaders of the team?

TP

I don't remember someone named Luther but I don't remember a lot of names. The guy who was our "sponsor" lived in town somewhere and had a

wife but I don't remember what his job on campus was, but somehow he became our guiding light to get us places.

We just wanted to have a good time and go out and shoot some baskets. Coaching was kind of random, and people would get tired. We weren't in shape necessarily. So somebody would go sit down and somebody else would go in.

Now maybe your teams in the last twenty-five years have been more competitive. The school for one, has a larger student base to work from. In those years, the total population of RISD was roughly 200 per class.

RS

I think the class sizes are around 500 or 600 now, but still a lot of similar team dynamics based on your time. It seems like we're not always in the best shape [Laughs] and more so just trying to have some fun with it. Sourcing players isn't a problem most of the time, but the commitment to go to practices and games is a constant issue.

TP

I think we had similar issues, but whoever showed up got to play that night. We had uniforms, but I don't remember where they came from or who paid for them.

It was fun to hear people react to this team from RISD like "Huh? A bunch of beatniks?" I think we had referees at most of the games, or we just relied on an honor system or something. But it helped me survive until graduation.

RS

Do you think your time on the team impacted your career and collaborative skills after graduation?

TP

It wasn't on purpose but I'm sure it did. When you're working with a group, you're always learning how to deal with group dynamics. The jobs I had after RISD never dealt with big groups though.

I did teach at a high school for a while, and that was an experience.

RS

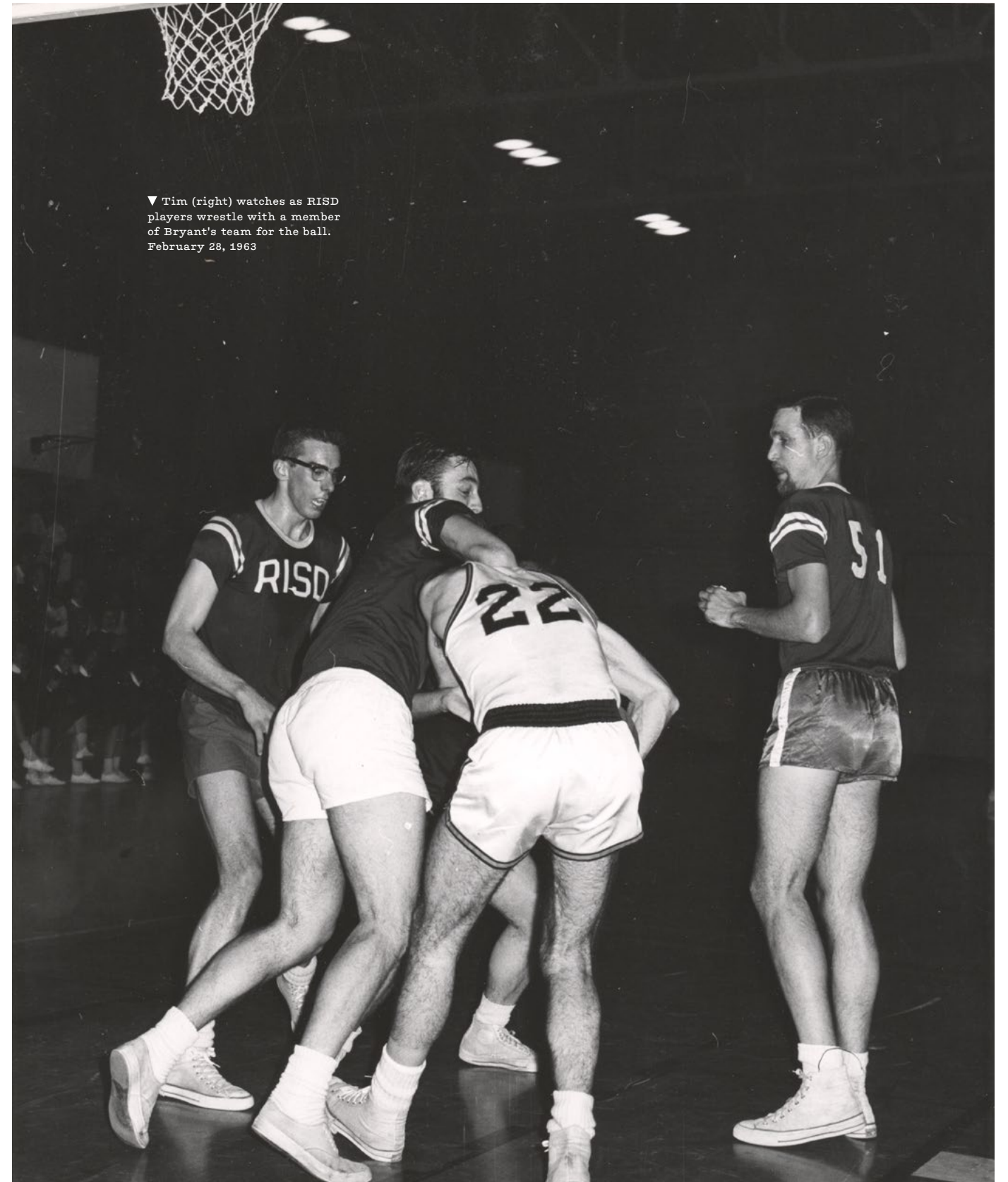
Did you ever play on any other basketball teams after RISD?

TP

My wife and I lived in Florida for quite a while. I coached some teams, and my son was very athletic. So I was always coaching his little league teams or helping him wherever he played. He

played baseball and soccer. He never played basketball. Then when we moved to North Carolina, there was an adult soccer team and some amateur golf stuff. That's probably the last time I was with a team of any kind. I'm too old to do anything anymore. [Laughs]

••



▼ Tim (right) watches as RISD players wrestle with a member of Bryant's team for the ball. February 28, 1963



***We just played. We knew we
weren't that great, and we
usually were not winning.***

– Tim Prout 65 ID





▲ Larry as the team's coach.
October 29, 1963

An interview with...

Coach Larry Appleton 64 BS LA

No I'm not talking about the character from *Perfect Strangers*.

When I first told Larry about my project he simply said "how 'bout that." If you go down the rabbit hole of basketball history at RISD like I have through researching, you'll see that Larry was one of the early architects of basketball teams at RISD itself, which I guess is fitting as he majored in Landscape Architecture. Yes, in previous years there were some small organized teams and intramural leagues, but the team that Larry helped as both a player and future coach went beyond the basics of what a basketball club required.

Today, almost every Balls coach in its history has either been a former player, current faculty member — or sometimes both — and Larry became one of the first to show the level of commitment needed to keep something like an art school basketball team alive and thriving. As we finished up our call together he told me good luck with my thesis and to "give 'em Hell!"

RYAN SCOTT

What was your experience with basketball before coming to RISD?

LARRY APPLETON

This is a story about everybody who ever played basketball for RISD. Most of these guys had some form of a high school career, and then when they came to RISD, there was nothing for them. There was no sports or anything. There were some little "incidents" that took place before the basketball team came together like the hockey team for instance. I don't know who those guys that got that team together were, I think they had a couple of ringers with them. They played this hockey game against somebody, and they beat him. That was the highlight of RISD sports. [Laughs] This little mystery. It took place a couple years before we started anything.

RISD didn't have anything in the way of athletic facilities. However, we had a bank. It was a big granite bank with pillars out front. It had a court, safe lockers, and all kinds of weird stuff, but it was our basketball team's practice area. We played a couple of games there. I remember once when we lost 75-74 because the scorekeeper was afraid to blow the whistle and say the time was over. Otherwise we would have won! [Laughs]

I can remember going to the student council and saying we wanted to have this intramural team. We didn't have any competition at the time, but we managed to drum up some opponents. The first game we played was against Providence College, their freshman team. I remember one of their players fouled out with four or five minutes to go. So it became five against four for the rest of the game. [Laughs] And we still lost! But it was close, and so that was good enough for us. It was good enough for us to be out there and doing it.

Every now and then we'd go to other colleges like Bryant, Barrington College, and Johnson and Wales. Some of these schools were almost in the same boat we were in because they were teams that had been propositioned by the students who wanted a basketball team at their school. The first year, we didn't do too much, but we got involved in a lot of things.

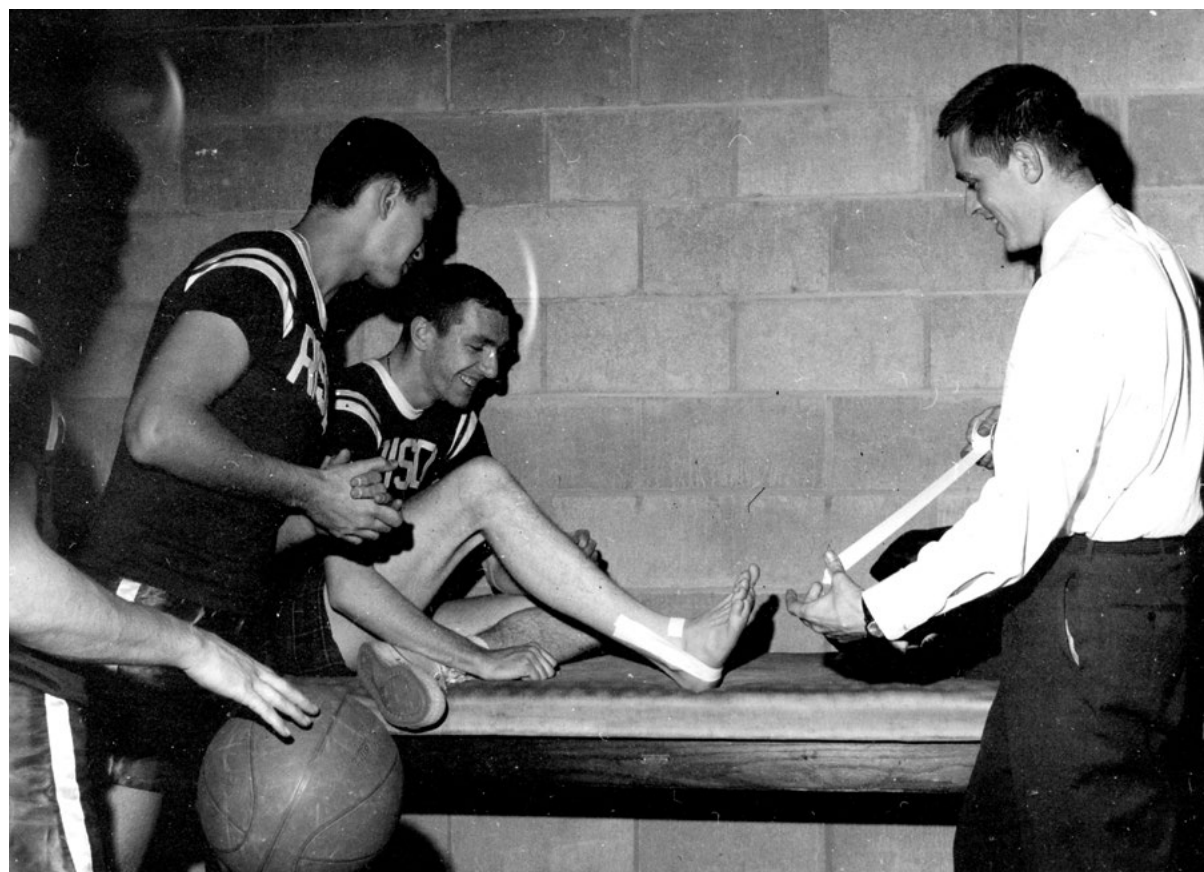
court. They were screaming "GO, GO, GO, GO!" All of a sudden they all flipped on to their backs and screamed "NADS!"

That's the kind of attitude we had, and it was beautiful. We didn't mind losing to some of these more organized teams. It was just the business of being out there and being in college, I guess. It stood us for three years. My job was to get the teams, get the referees, and get everybody paid. I was kind of the manager and a water boy. [Laughs]

I played in a couple of games and proved I should have been the water boy. I say with a certain amount of pride that it meant something to other RISD people. They really took to it. Same thing with the "GO NADS!" cheer.

RS

Do you know when the Bank Building closed and converted from a gym to a studio space?



▲ Larry (right) taping Norm Rajotte's ankle before a game. c. 1962

You're called the Balls, but I remember we played Bryant College, and we got our asses wiped! A bunch of guys from RISD went to see the game. Bryant had brought their cheerleaders, and the cheerleaders came out and did their thing. But then these guys from our side all rolled their blue jeans up above their knees with their hands on their hips, and danced out onto the center of the court. Then they knelt down and began to pound on the

Right at the end of our three year career. We started to play up at Hope High School on Hope Street.

We had some people who were pretty good basketball players in high school, and I guess that sort of brought them out to play, but we never were able to really get them going and fit into a more organized system. It was an experience. [Laughs]

RS

I've heard how there was a bus that you guys would drive to go out and play at local Navy bases like the Quonset Flyers and Davisville Seabees.

LA

I had a couple of camp followers. [Laughs] We were standing in a locker room when we were playing a group called Berkshire Christian College, and this kid reached into his pocket and a pistol fell out onto the floor and went off. It was a blank, but I found myself in so many situations for which I had no explanation.

I don't know how you guys are now, but our team was made up of people who had one life when they were in high school, and then they came to RISD and they weren't even living in dorms. The schedules some of these guys had were a lot, some of them were architects, some of them were painters. The team gave them a consistent opportunity to get back to that previous life. I can't say that I enjoyed every minute of it but it surely added to my college career.

I think we might have won four, five games in three years. *Those* we got because we kept playing the kids in the neighborhood.

When this whole thing was going on, we used to work out of the Student Activities office in the bank. I remember Gordon Allen was our leader.

I only helped out the team for three years, and then I graduated. I don't know whether the basketball continued after we all graduated.

RS

► A tribute to Larry in an issue of *Blockprint*. March 18, 1964

I've seen reports that there was a team that played up until 1968

but it fell apart mid season, and then teams would re-emerge over the year, but never really as an organized group or anything more than an intramural team.

LA

That's really the spirit of the whole thing. People came and went.

RISD never had a real gym. Back then, nobody even ran up and down Benefit Street! Right now you go out there and everybody's jogging. We used to send them out during warmups at basketball practice and have them run up the hill on College Street, down Benefit, and then back down Angell Street and back to the Bank Building. It was just a lap around the block since I didn't want anybody crossing streets, but man, it was not exactly pleasant. [Laughs]

RS

As somebody who still has to walk those hills every day, I can imagine running a lap around that is a good warm up! [Laughs]

LA

We tried to do all the little warm up drills like passing and all that kind of stuff. But the problem was that the lifestyles these guys were living was not conducive to endurance. To my surprise, we led in a lot of games. In the Davisville Seabee game, I remember we were leading by nine with about three minutes to go, and we lost. [Laughs] It's really tough to run a program involving athletics at a place like RISD, but it really does have a place, and particularly if it's student organized. So my hat's off to you guys, to the Balls—we were the Gonads, and a lot of other things too.

A TRIBUTE TO THE COACH

"Larry Appleton—Coach of the RISD Basketball Team"

The Team wishes to extend to Larry its profound thanks for the past three years of dedication and service to the team as its coaching staff, manager, ball carrier, etc., etc.

Always to be heard:

At practice, "What are you doing?"

During the game, "Set it up; hands up!"

At half time, "All right, we still have a chance, but . . . !!"

After a loss, ""

After a victory, "I've waited three years for this, I don't believe it!"

The games we did win were due mainly to Larry's hawk-eyes, spotting our many weaknesses and strongpoints (when we had one). Our successes were due to his spotting strongpoints and monopolizing on them.

Again, from all of us on the team, and the rest of the staff coaching, many thanks Larry and best of luck!

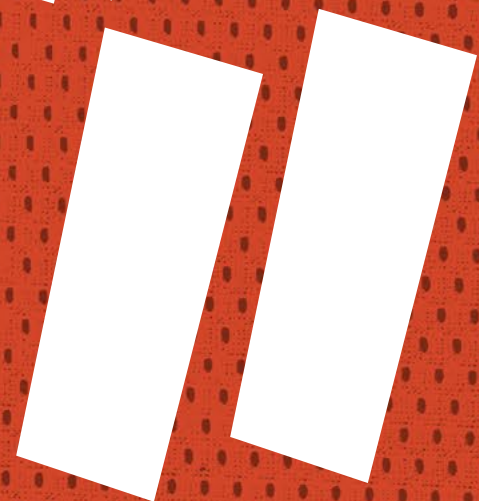
RS

You mentioned the players didn't have living habits that were conducive to endurance and stamina. Do you mean there was a lot of smoking and drinking among the players on the team?



***It's hard but that's the
nature of the beast. What
you do with it is in your
heart. You're gonna
remember the bullshit.***

***– Coach Larry
Appleton 64 BS LA***



LA

The all-nighters for projects didn't help. The architects were always into something. It's hard but that's the nature of the beast. What you do with it is in your heart. That's what you're gonna remember. You're gonna remember the bullshit. [Laughs]

RS

Speaking to sports at RISD now, there's still a hockey team, there's still a basketball team. We've had cycling teams, we've had soccer teams, we've had flag football. We've had mixed martial arts and boxing clubs, running clubs.

LA

My god.

RS

I really think the demand is still there. There was a volleyball team last year. That's why I feel like there's always the stereotype that art students aren't the most athletically engaged people, but people need to be aware of our programs and know that not only do they exist, but it has a much longer history than just something that a few students threw together.

LA

The big thing is that the students did it. The students brought their lives with them.

RS

Have you kept anything from your time on the team, like jerseys or photographs?

LA

The only thing I have is a picture of the team that hangs on my wall. Every now and then I stop on the wall and try to remember everybody.

RS

They're a few copies of photos from your time in the RISD Archives.

I think even from that Bryant game that you mentioned, but sadly none of the guys with the rolled up jeans laying on their backs.

LA

I don't think they want to remember that! [Laughs]
I was very critical of the Bryant coach for running up the score during that game. When they got ahead like that they were pretty nasty. [Laughs]
I was always hoping that I could say to the coach, "Well, I hope you doing that screws up the rest of your season."

RS

Any other fond memories of the team?

LA

I remember we held a dinner and we gave out some awards. I got a check from the team [Laughs], which I appreciated since I was getting married right after graduation.
We had a coach too who was a teacher at RISD in the wood shop.

RS

Luther Eidam, right?

LA

I think so, yes.

RS

What do you remember about him?

LA

He tried real hard but he was really up against it. The lives these guys lived and their lack of discipline didn't help.
We had one fellow who, wherever he got the ball, he went right to the basket, but he was very good at finding openings. Some of these guys are probably very good basketball players.
We had a guy who was six foot seven, Frank Kibbe. I remember Frank getting injured and he tried to play a game with a knee brace. I wonder where some of these guys are now. Bruce Bockstael was the head of the Connecticut Department of Public Works for a time. When you turn a corner, all of a sudden you recognize somebody. I stayed around Rhode Island and kept running into him. Same with Richard Russo.
Bill Ewen, who was the other organizer, was at our wedding, and so was Tim Prout.

RS

You all met through the team? You didn't know each other before you put this all together?

LA

No, no. When the Bank Building was a gym we used to see each other down there just shooting some basketball and that's how it got started.
The school was interested in activities for students, and that's why you are successful and so are all these other things that came along. But they came along because of the students.

RS

How did you get funding for the club?

LA

Actually, the student council funded it. We asked for funding when we only had about four kids at the time and we used that to get some shirts.

RS

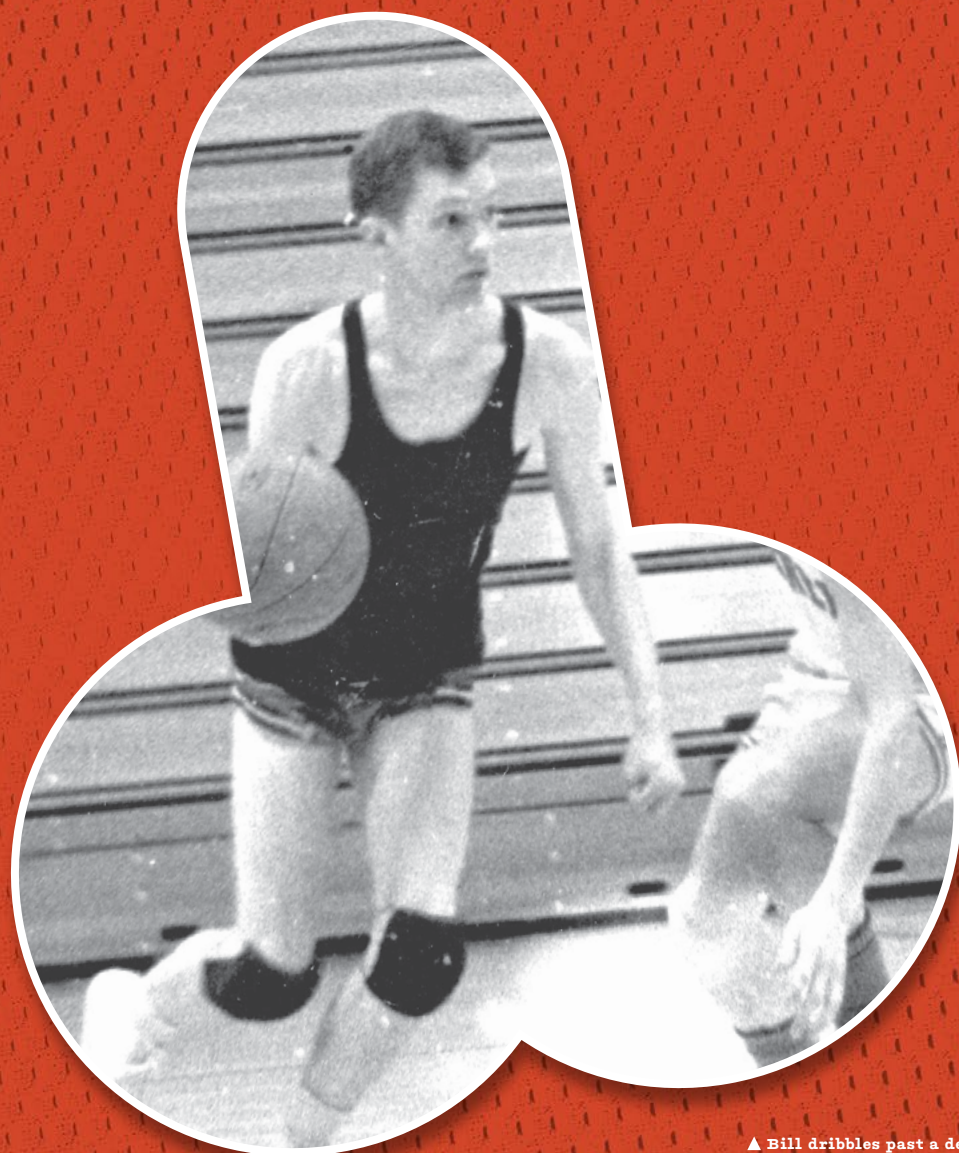
Do you think your time on the basketball team and your experience putting that together and running it impacted your career and practice after RISD?

LA

I think it did with my business and things outside of my business. Everything from the Jaycees, to church, to all kinds of small get together type things. One of the biggest things was being in Rotary International for thirty years.
I really got to say, talk about something coming back to haunt you. [Laughs] That time did have a big effect on me and maybe that's why I remember it so fondly.



RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN				
BASKETBALL SCHEDULE				
▼ The RISD Basketball schedule and roster, listing Larry and Bill as coaches. c. 1963				
NOVEMBER 20	DAVISVILLE	HOME	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
NOVEMBER 23	JOHNSON AND WALES	AWAY	JOHNSTON	8:00 P.M.
DECEMBER 3	BRYANT	AWAY	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
DECEMBER 6	BERKSHIRE	HOME	MT PLEASANT	8:00 P.M.
DECEMBER 17	ROGER WILLIAMS	AWAY	AWAY	8:00 P.M.
JANUARY 7	DAVISVILLE	AWAY	DAVISVILLE	8:00 P.M.
JANUARY 11	BERKSHIRE	AWAY	BERKSHIRE	8:00 P.M.
FEBRUARY 1	CALVIN COOLIDGE	HOME	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
FEBRUARY 7	JOHNSON & WALES	HOME	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
FEBRUARY 11	ROGER WILLIAMS	HOME	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
FEBRUARY 27/2	BARRINGTON	AWAY	BARRINGTON	6:30 P.M.
MARCH 6	BRYANT	HOME	HOPE	8:00 P.M.
COACH				
LAWRENCE APPLETON, BILL EWEN				
FRANK KIBBE, NORMAN RAJOTTE, WAYNE SULLIVAN, PAUL ELAKESLEE, BRUCE BOCKSTAEL,				
LEON CHATTILIAN, GARY CORNELL, PAT BRADY, DAN PAUL, RONALD RUSSO, JOHN				
SCHLEYER, JOHN SILVERIO, TIM PROUT.				



▲ Bill dribbles past a defender during a game at Providence College. March 14, 1961

An interview with...

Bill "Steamboat" Ewen 63 GD

I may be a little biased as a fellow student of RISD Graphic Design, but Bill was one of my favorite interviewees from this entire research process.

He still lives in Providence, just a short walk from campus, so I was able to sit down with him in person and both hear and see some of the history he had to share.

He would describe himself as more of a historian and not a hoarder as his wife says, but among old newspapers and scrapbooks in his attics rest RISD basketball jerseys from the late 1940s and the short sleeve striped ones worn by the Red Devils.

To be able to see some of these things in person and in color really helped to make our stories feel just a little more connected.

RYAN SCOTT

Could you tell me about your time at RISD? What year did you graduate and how many years were you involved with the team?

BILL EWEN

I graduated from Graphic Design. I guess you could say I had a minor in Photography. Harry Callahan came to RISD to start the photography department while I was there, before the department formally established a degree program, and he took twenty graphic designers as his very first students. I was one of the students. I loved photography, and that's part of what I did in my commercial work.

We started the team around 1961 I believe. I was involved as a player for about three years and then a year after graduation as a coach. I hung around because I still knew a lot of the guys on the team from my own time.

RS

Before you came to RISD, what was your experience with basketball?

BE

I played varsity baseball in high school, but not basketball, though I always liked it. I played pickup games, school yard type games like that.

RS

When you came to RISD, what was the athletic environment like? How much did students and the school itself support organized teams?

BE

During my freshman year I don't think I was aware there were any teams. There was a sailing team that was pretty good.

There was a gym in the old Bank Building, and anybody from RISD could use it. I remember from my freshman year, we had a painting class in the College Building, and during break a bunch of us would go down to shoot baskets and then come back up to class.

RISD wasn't a "rah, rah" team support place back then—not that it is now, necessarily—but it is a lot more now than it was then. As far as student culture, anybody could play and use the gym for whatever they wanted to.

RS

Whose idea was it to form the basketball team?

BE

[Points to self] Mine. Not the one from the '40s obviously, but this was my idea. I made a sign, which I probably have somewhere. My wife says I'm a hoarder. I'd say I'm an archivist.



RS

Was it difficult finding people at RISD that wanted to form a basketball team, or was there a kind of vacuum, and as soon as something came about, a lot of people suddenly wanted to join?

BE

That's hard to say. We didn't have to go begging. When I put up the sign, I remember all the people showed up to the first practice. Some did drift away but overall we had a good, strong core.

RS

Luther Eidam, a RISD faculty member, was noted as one of the team's first "official" coaches. Did the team recruit him early on just to have some kind of formal leadership?

BE

I don't think we recruited him. I think he volunteered because he had some experience coaching and wanted to help.

RS

How organized were those early practices?

BE

Once we were organized we practiced fairly regularly throughout the week at the gym. We wrote simple plays, and it wasn't that strict. We did drills, layups, and worked on our dribbling and passing.

RS

Was it difficult trying to find schools to play against, and then after figuring that out, managing your studio time on top of games?

BE

I know there was a fellow who was something like the head of the athletics department at Roger Williams College. I forget his name, but he was very helpful. He knew what we were trying to do and he gave us advice and so forth.

All of the teams we played worked us into their schedules. A lot of them were in legit leagues

◀ Bill owns an original marble column from the RISD Gym that was scavenged from a closet during renovations. July 2025



▲ A plaque gifted to "Steamboat" after helping coach the team for a season following his graduation. c. 1964

with real, complex schedules, but they'd always find a place for us to play them. We were always flexible, since we didn't have to adhere to any set schedule of our own.

RS

How were the away games, such as the trips to Davisville?

BE

It was fun for me. I can't speak for anybody else. Sometimes it was a little intimidating going into these places where they have real teams and cheerleaders and so forth. But once we started playing, it was fun.

RS

Was there a lot of student support for the team in general at RISD? What was the reputation of the basketball team like and how aware was the student body of its activity?

BE

I don't know what a lot of people were thinking, but we never got any crap or ridicule from students [Laughs]. People who were aware of us were supportive, but it wasn't like Georgia Tech or some place where that's all they talked about. We weren't a laughing stock, however.

RS

You helped organize the first Balls Alumni game in October 2003. When did you meet Joe Gebbia?

BE

He originally contacted me to talk about organizing the team. After that we didn't talk much, but then he was fully organized and so forth, and he wanted to have this alumni game, so he contacted me again about putting that together.

RS

What was it like coming back to RISD in the context of an alumni game and seeing such a different basketball environment and sports culture on campus?

BE

There were a lot of people there. I was by far the oldest guy

besides maybe one other guy who overlapped with my time at RISD by a year or so. The game was at Wheeler, so it wasn't like a true homecoming game, since our team had never played there. Luckily the teams were split and made up of a mix of both alumni and current players, since that wouldn't have been too fun for me.

Coming back to RISD was great and I was thrilled to see a team was back. I've stayed in Providence since graduating so I never stayed out of touch with the school, but I was really pleased when Joe contacted me and I tried to encourage him.

I do remember, speaking of alumni games, that in the mid '60's after I graduated, I played with a team called "The Freelancers" that were made up of RISD alumni. There was a softball league but we also played basketball from time to time and they'd let us play in the gym before it was converted to a painting studio.

RS

What has that time on the team meant for you? What did you see as the greatest benefit of playing on the basketball team during that time?

BE

The team was a group of friends who got along and weren't necessarily the same people we had anything to do with in the studio, in our majors.

There were architects and textile designers and everything else. The exercise part was good too. It's good for releasing tension. [Laughs]

RS

As someone who, along with Joe Gebbia, organized their own iteration of basketball at RISD, what advice would you give to those who wish to take on similar challenges and manage to build a team from scratch?

BE

It would be hard to give advice based on my experience, considering I'm 84 and everything was so different back then at RISD. It was really "loosey goosey". When I initially went to the Student Activities Organization, I had to meet at somebody's house on Benefit Street where they were having a meeting, and give a presentation.

I don't think they laughed or anything. [Laughs] But I don't know if they knew how serious I was, or how long it would last. They thought it was a good idea overall.

For someone trying to do it today, I would say don't be afraid of failing. Just be afraid of not trying. The whole thing was a slow, learning process. It started when we "raided" the vault in the Bank Building and found all of those old uniforms from the 1940s, and then step by step we got more organized. We got new uniforms, a coach, and played some basketball games. That's it.



▲ Bill in his home with his Red Devils jersey. July 2025
 ► A closeup of Bill's coaching sweater. c. 1963





***Don't be afraid of failing.
Just be afraid of not trying.
The whole thing was a slow,
learning process.***

***– Bill "Steamboat"
Ewen 63 GD***





▲► Red Devils jersey, courtesy of Bill Ewen. c. 1961

1969-1999

THE RISD BASKETBALL DARK AGES

The end of RISD basketball during the late 1960s was a death that could've happened in many ways, but at least it was on the students' own terms. There were some reports of alumni using the RISD Gym to play basketball on Monday nights, but future access to Hope High School's gym would soon end either way. By 1969, court-ordered busing programs had been implemented in most public schools in Providence in an effort to integrate local black neighborhoods into previously predominantly white schools. However, this effort was met with rampant racial violence and rioting in many schools around the city, including Hope High. Tensions and racial attacks on the school's grounds were so common that students referred to the school as "Hopeless High" by the early 1970s and all sports, including basketball, were forced to be played in a "closed gym" environment with no outside spectators allowed. For this reason, I believe it is unlikely that RISD would have been allowed to use this space, and with the RISD Gym becoming a painting studio around the same time, it is unclear where else they would have gone next.

It wasn't until February 1972 that basketball became a point of discussion at RISD again, and this time it came from an open letter by Director of the Student Activities Association Gordon Allen in the school publication, *RISD Rag*. This letter, titled "Do we have a student government?" helped to fill in some of the gaps of sports history at RISD for me as I researched for this project. An excerpt talking about the origins of student government at RISD read:

"Cumbersome as this may seem, this group operated within the framework of the constitution and managed the administration of most student affairs and their annual budget well.

"Funding would be determined by a council of five students before every semester.

"1947-1968: During these years, we engaged in intercollegiate competition in sailing, basketball, skiing, and hockey. We had student-run classes in dance and mime, twenty clubs and two annual dramatic productions.

"In the late sixties, we commenced a period of political activism when students felt obliged to show less concern for athletics, social activities and recreation and greater concern for world-wide problems: War protest, rights of minorities, relevance of college studies to the human experience, drug use, voting privileges of the 18 year olds, etc. A loan system was set up through SAO and Carr House became a coffee house while 20 clubs were still funded and organized.

"Partly due to a rearrangement of college priorities, but more probably due to student apathy, the RISD students in the last five years 'lost' or discontinued: Use of the gym, Basketball, Hockey, 'Co-Lab', Senior dance, Mime classes, Dance classes, Use of the auditorium, Pool tables, Ping pong, Newspaper offices, SPECTRUM magazine, Portfolio offices, Music rehearsal rooms, Student Lounge (in room 437).

"Perhaps an alternate form of government should be sought, lest the funds intended for group benefit get all channeled into departments or individual projects or someone decides that all student activities are superfluous."

Mike Tylick and Ronn Spencer were surely on to something.

The following September there were talks to tear down the old Bank Building altogether, but the Painting department, who occupied much of the upper levels, supported its preservation while the Sculpture department on the ground level were frustrated by the inability to add more floors, as the structure of the building itself was deemed too weak to sustain new additions.

Around the same time in September 1974 a New Student Board met and among other items, outlined activities in need of funding, including: "Athletics such as basketball, swimming, tennis, softball, hockey, soccer, volleyball etc." The Student Board charged a fee for all activities: "for the purpose of creating a mass of money on which the student body can draw for extra curricula Student Activities (outside



those provided by the school)”. The funds were not meant to be used by departments to pay for things outside of public club activities and events, perhaps as a way to prevent past corruption tactics from popping up again. The Student Activities Organization also subsidized many clubs during this time and kept track of all income and payments as well as listed the names of anyone who withdrew money from the SAO fund for their club.

In a January 17, 1975 issue of the RISD publication *Express-O* it appeared that general interest in sports at RISD were returning in earnest and many began to wish for organized teams with intercollegiate play once again. However, the current state of the university lacked any athletic activity, as one writer theorized that “if Mr. Atlas paid a friendly visit to the warming confines of this capital of design instructions, unquestionably his response would be, ‘This school sucks’”. As with every other period of athletic revival at RISD, this anonymous writer put it best by stating:

“Unmistakeably what this school needs is a fresh supply of wet, smelly jocks. For remember, a learning paradise is only complete when the alumni can proudly toast a few smooth beers to the ‘Big One’s’ of their old alma mater”.

The writer also appealed to more vain benefits of sports and exercise as well: “Billowing biceps have always been a good crowd pleaser when it comes to the fairer sex. Athletes are noted for constantly maintaining well balanced sex lives.” The writer closed the piece by campaigning for the construction of Olympic size swimming pools, a new gymnasium, football fields, and offering sports scholarships to high school students as well as mandatory gym classes. They finish:

“I believe the RISD boy who always gets sand kicked in his face will be a thing of the past. And while other schools have football and polo heroes RISD will be able to boast of more than a star tap dancer and long distance meditationists. Pledge your support and money to A MORE RUGGED RISD, BX 276”.

Though much of this sentiment may have been ironic, the average RISD student during this time undoubtedly wished for sports, if nothing more than to be an outlet for pent up studio frustration.

BRIEF REVIVALS

Basketball is mentioned once again within the RISD Archives in September 1977, when an issue of *RISD Press* contained a section detailing student organizations, with athletic clubs including basketball, softball, and hockey. The section was prefaced with a disclaimer

◀ Image from the "Athletic Appeal" article in an issue of *Express-O*. January 17, 1975



stating that each club operated slightly differently in terms of dues, membership requirements, goals and so on. Additionally an article in the same issue mentions a recent arrangement between Brown and RISD that allowed RISD students to swim for free in Brown’s pools, a policy which is still in effect to this day. Likewise, it was reported that Brown’s director of intramural sports allowed for three and five-person RISD basketball teams to play in Brown’s league, but there is no more information on these teams available. As of 1977, the only on campus athletic facilities at RISD were a single outdoor basketball court behind Farnum Hall, a dorm building demolished in 2011 for a lack of structural integrity. The place where Farnum Hall stood was a small grass field up until a few years ago when I noticed a large, ugly, flat, concrete surface laid over it. I’ll let you find the symbolism there.

In January 1981, a small, windowless weight room was installed in Nickerson Hall. By all accounts the space was an afterthought from the beginning, as the dorm was not built with a weight room in mind. Some years later while South Hall was being constructed, the basement of Nickerson was used by freshman students to sneak alcohol on campus. Around this time it was advertised in student newspapers that Wheeler School on Hope Street would be offering space for RISD students interested in basketball, volleyball, soccer, and gymnastics. The only time available was from 7 to 10pm on Tuesdays, coincidentally the same time and day that the Balls hold practice to this day. For the next forty-five years this gym would be home to numerous versions of RISD basketball. That same year, Olney-Margolies Athletic Center (OMAC) at Brown University was dedicated. Like Wheeler School, the fieldhouse with multiple basketball courts would become an important part of basketball history at RISD, with many students throughout the years using the space for impromptu pickup games.

▲ An illustration featured in an issue of *RISD Press*. September 11, 1977

By May 1984, the outdoor court behind Farnum Hall was paved over and made into a parking lot — Joni-Mitchell-style. An article in *RISD Voice* by Francois Poisson titled “Good-bye Basketball, Hello Parking Lot” acted as the court’s obituary. During summer evenings students from Johnson and Wales, RISD, Camp Street, and local young people in Providence would play pick up games “at one of the nicest courts in town”. A fourteen foot concrete wall topped by Farnum Hall was on the east side of the court, “but the location of the court, perched on a terrace above the Benefit Street dorm, gave an unhindered view of central Providence and the hills of Scituate beyond”. The asphalt court was rough, producing unpredictable bounces caused by bumps and depressions. “It’ll make a better player out of you” said locals and students alike. Games were half court since there was only one rim. The article featured testimonials from fans of the space:

“This is really a super court,’ said Paul, a restaurant manager from downtown as we played one-on-one during his break from work. ‘It’s really the only open court on the East Side unless you go way over to Gano Street and I don’t have time for that.”

The baskets came down on April 11 “unceremoniously and unencumbered by the possible protests of students for it was done during our spring vacation”. The baskets were sent out to RISD’s beachfront farm property in Barrington, Rhode Island known as Tillinghast Farm “for no convenience to we who don’t have cars.” This was one of the last remaining recreational spaces RISD had to offer. “Also gone is an interaction between the students and the community” as Poisson put it, “I’m sure the court will make a wonderful parking lot”. If you’re wondering, there are no basketball hoops at Tillinghast Beach today, only a sad volleyball net.

RISD HOOPS

Around 1987, a more formal basketball team at RISD was formed, who referred to themselves as “RISD Hoops”. For more information about their founding and legacy, refer to the interviews with Sean Gayle and Randy Guillot, who were members of that team. The team played local union teams on the weekends, but according to a March 10, 1988 issue of *RISD Voice*, they would sometimes play Johnson and Wales at the Wheeler Gym. In this same issue, a student wrote an article titled “Introducing: The RISD Athletic Court”, wherein they pleaded with the students in a half-serious tone for the formation of an organized athletics program at the school. The writer asked their peers:

“We’re looking for a few good men. No we’re not the Marines, we’re not the Khmer Rouge. No, we’re the RISD Athletic Club” RISD needs an athletic club that goes farther than the Nads and the basketball court. We want the NCAA. We want to take on Stanford and UNLV and UCLA and those earthtoned guys next door”.

Though the school has a running club, the writer believed “the club is one thing, but we’re done training. We want blood now”. Once again, students appeal to more vain desires when promoting sports at RISD,

sharing that “some studies show that sex life is greatly enhanced” with athletic activity, “Maybe you want to pick up a few Brown guys or gals. What’s a better way than to show off your physique?”

In September of 1988, the Catanzaro Student Fitness Center opened on campus. The project was funded by Robert and Marjorie Catanzaro, and designed by Professor James Barnes. Furniture for the space was also paid for by the class of 1988. Though not home to a basketball court, the space was and still is used as a small weight room, dance studio area, and auxiliary training space for students.



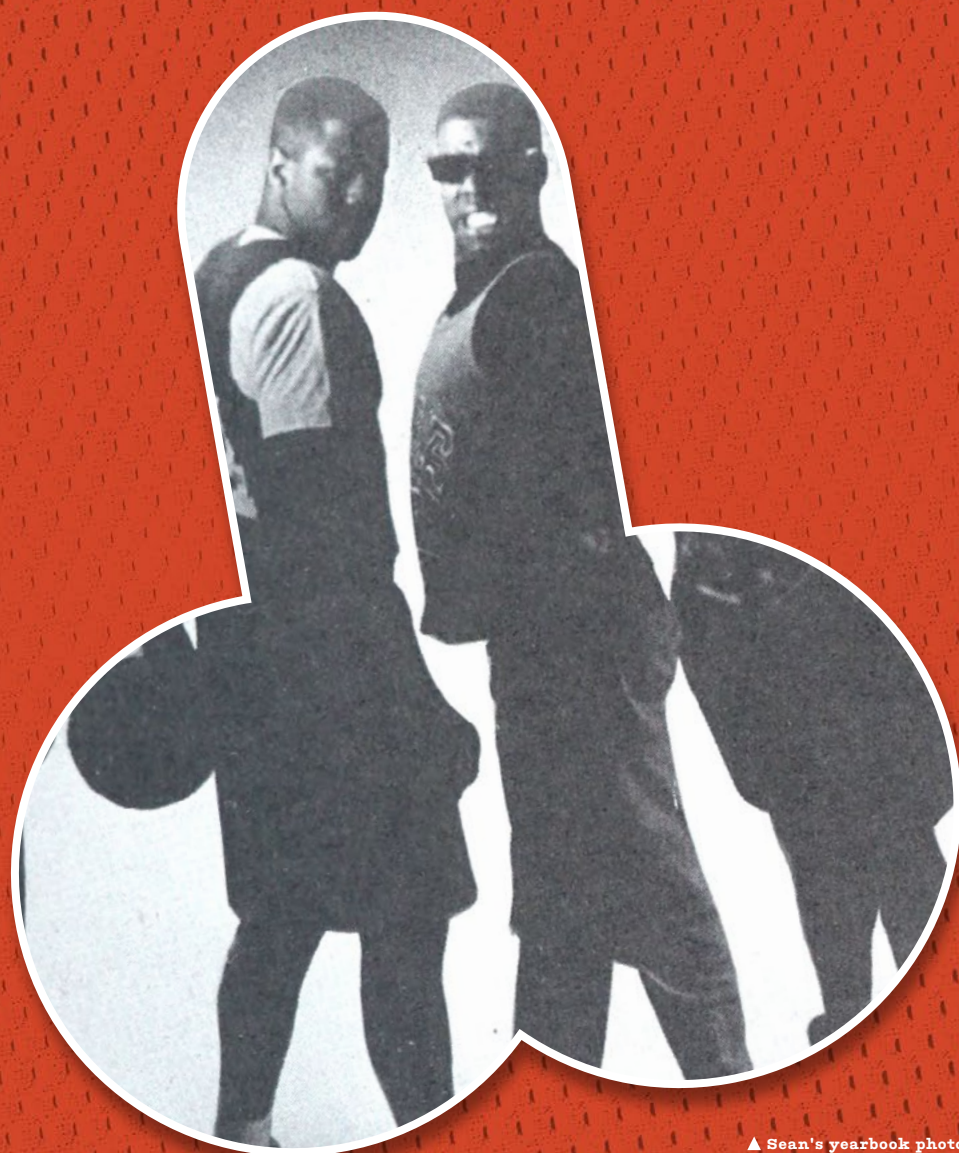
By 1992, it seemed that basketball had left the students of RISD yet again, as the founding members and surrounding friend group that made up the RISD Hoops team graduated, and the already casual club team disappeared and turned into just another memory of college years to share with your kids. For the next decade, there was no recorded history of the sport at RISD, no club teams, no intercollegiate play, no mentions in student newspapers — nothing. However, the new millennium came with the dawn of the next great age of RISD basketball: the Balls. Once again the self-determination of a few committed students would help shape the next quarter century of basketball history at one of the world’s premier art institutions.

▲ The RISD Hoops team. c. 1987



▲► Students photographed by Dan Fergus at one of the first RISD Hoops practices at the Wheeler School. December 1987





▲ Sean's yearbook photo, or rather, photo(s). c. 1990

An interview with...

Sean Gayle 90 ID

Early on in my research process for this very project, I combed through a small closet in the RISD Student Fitness Center and found a box of old Balls merch, jerseys, and scorebooks. Among other 'artifacts' that helped shape this story, I found a print out of a black and white photo of ten men in a gym with RISD basketball jerseys. Next to the photo, written in pen, was just "1987".

After searching around online for the source, I finally found a post from a RISD alumni group on Facebook from over a decade ago with the same photo, shared by Sean Gayle. Within a week, I was able to get in contact with him and schedule an interview, where he revealed to me the largely unknown and unrecorded history of "RISD Hoops".

RYAN SCOTT

Your time at RISD is one I'm the least familiar with in terms of basketball at the school. Could you tell me a little about your time there and when the team began to form?

SEAN GAYLE

I graduated in 1990 from RISD from the Industrial Design department. I graduated high school in 1986 and played high school basketball. I consider myself a pretty good player. Obviously, I was interested in art, and if I was good enough to play the next level of basketball, I probably would have gone that way instead. So I was relegated to the hobby and club level.

During my freshman year there were a couple of guys that I would see at Brown University's gym [OMAC]. We would play pickup at the Athletic Center there since we had access to it. It was good to get to go there and get up some shots after studio or on weekends. I didn't play hockey and the Nads were the only "official" RISD team at that time. I don't know whose idea it was, but one of the guys there thought we could put together a more formal team.

After we got some guys together we found our coach, Lloyd Francis, who was a Princeton grad living in Providence and working at Citizen Bank.

He would play pickup with us and we figured he would be a good coach for us. He's a pretty short guy, but he's a good player. He was more of a buddy than a coach.

We played some of our games at the Wheeler School, but I don't know how that all worked out, but as a club the school allowed a certain amount of money for us to use. So after we applied to be a club at RISD we used that money to rent out a gym. We practiced there as well but practice was really just us getting pickup games together.

Eventually we arranged to play Johnson and Wales. They had a club team, and one of my work study jobs was driving the shuttle bus. So I was able to get transportation for us. In the beginning there were maybe six of us, with most of us having played in high school and now going to an art school with no official team. We all still had a love for the game and wanted to play. Something that started informal then became formal.

We had the most bare bones basketball jersey. For a design school, you think we could have done something a little nicer but it was just "RISD" in these block letters with a basketball in the middle. They were maroon with white printing. My wife and my daughters like to wear them. They think it's "vintage" or retro cool.

RS

What was the student response to the team? I know you mentioned the Nads being around but did you feel like students supported this new basketball team?

SG

Not freshman year. No, not at all. Not even my sophomore year. I think most people didn't realize that we had a club team. But my junior and senior years, people started coming to the games a little bit here and there. Maybe they were just looking for something to do, having been in the studio all day and figuring they could go catch a game from the basketball team. We weren't particularly good. We had a couple of really good players on our team, but it was truly just a club and people took it as seriously as that.

RS

Besides Johnson and Wales, do you remember any other teams you played?

SG

I think we played against company teams around Providence. Games would be on Sunday mornings and you could definitely smell booze on some of the

guys from the night before. Or maybe it was on us, I don't know.

It wasn't super organized. Johnson and Wales is probably the only real team that we played. We may have played Brown's club team but I don't remember. We tried to have a game every weekend we could get.

But I do remember being in some type of corporate league and taking the van up to a gym in West Warwick to play in a Civic Center there. It was a cavernous building. It was just us, a bunch of college students, against a league of grown men with real jobs. We were the youngest guys there for sure.

RS

Do you know what happened to the team after you graduated?

SG

No idea. It was just a bunch of guys who had a love for the game and were interested in playing. It was just a fun club, super informal.

It all started with those few guys and then anyone who was interested kind of found us, you know? We didn't need to put up flyers or anything really.

RS

How did your time on the team go on to shape your practice after RISD? Did it affect your ability to work in a group? I think it's interesting that people who go on these RISD club teams, they're not going to be career basketball players, but I still feel like those lessons kind of run over into their creative lives.

SG

Both of my daughters have played two sports at a pretty high level. We traveled around the country doing AAU, basketball and volleyball. I always told them that sports are a microcosm of life. They're going to be people that you're going to work with that you're not going to like all that much. But to be successful you have to figure out how to work with those people. You can hold a grudge, you can decide to not pass the ball to that person and ice them out, but that makes it like four against five or three against five. I would say that those are the lessons that I really learned as well as the discipline to stick with something, even if you don't feel like going to practice or something like that.

Sports are an equalizer. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't care who your parents are, it doesn't care how much money you have. It's a truly merit based thing.



▲ Sean's RISD Hoops jersey.
c. 1987

RS

Did you continue to play basketball after RISD?

SG

Yeah. As I said, I love the sport. As I sit now, I look in my backyard. We got a half basketball court that I put in just because it's just part of my life, man.

I played in some corporate leagues over the years. At this point now, I'm just shooting around with my kids. When I play pickup now I play with

the guys that know they have work tomorrow, so that's the attitude that we have. The days of me playing against 18 year olds are over.





***Sports are an equalizer. It
doesn't matter who you are,
who your parents are. It's
truly merit based.***



– Sean Gayle 90 ID



▲ Members of the team with coach Lloyd Francis (far right, top row) c. 1987



▲ Randy's yearbook photo.
c. 1990

An interview with...

Randy Guillot 90 BArch

Randy, like Sean, was a member of the short-lived but fondly remembered RISD Hoops team. As he will share, Randy often found himself involved with other interesting 'extracurricular activities' with his friends, questionable financial choices, and a healthy supply of alcohol. Randy is also the father of a friend of mine at RISD, so it's funny to think that someone from my parent's generation could have just as much fun as we can.

RANDY GUILLOT

First off, I'd like to say that I think this such an interesting project you have going on and the rabbit hole you've found yourself in.

RYAN SCOTT

Thanks! It's nice to connect with these people and see how excited they are to share these memories. It's important to highlight that someone can be both an artist and athlete, and you don't have to live those lives separately.

RG

It's amazing that you've been able to track down these people and have these conversations. I had no idea there was any kind of sports legacy before us in basketball. So many of us came to RISD with a better idea of what life including athletics looked like instead of what life looked like with just art. But suddenly there wasn't an avenue to express ourselves that way and have that community.

I don't remember everybody's name, which is kind of sad, but there were these guys, Ken and Dave, who played on the team during the first year I was a part of it in 1986-87. They were these guys from Massachusetts with big Boston accents who grew up around the same area and now found themselves in a place where they needed some kind

of athletic connection. They weren't your prototypical RISD students. Sure they had a focus on art but they grew up in New England with an emphasis on athletics. So Ken was really the leader of this whole thing and helped put it together. At first it was just pickup games, but we quickly met Lloyd Francis, who then became our coach. Lloyd was just a guy from the community who was kicking our asses on a regular basis. We knew eventually that we wanted to form a team and convinced him to be our coach, though at the time we didn't know what that was going to look like.

Then we started practicing. First we just stole time at the Brown athletic center, and then we were able to rent time at the Wheeler School. Have you heard of that?

RS

We still practice there today.

RG

Amazing! We got some money from the school then to rent a team bus so we could travel to play games in this recreation league that Lloyd had got us into. My memory might be foggy or wrong so tell me if I'm losing my marbles, but we would play on weekend mornings out in west Warwick. We played against what was basically a men's league with these gigantic humans. A lot of them appeared to have been out most of the night before with their buddies. They were all union guys. So we would come in with our ragtag RISD team, and they all got a kick out of it, but we stood our ground. Eventually we got used to playing as a team together and that turned into games against Emerson College and some more legitimate programs. We would play Johnson and Wales from time to time too.

RS

How did the rest of the RISD community support the team? What was the student body reaction like around that time?

RG

There was no support to begin with because no one knew it existed. We were our own PR team. We had to go out and hang flyers and poster the canvas to generate any interest. Soon we started to draw some crowds. I remember one game against Johnson and Wales at the Wheeler Gym where we filled the whole place. It was amazing. I couldn't believe something like this could happen at RISD.

RS

Sean has shown me photos of the old "RISD



▲▼► Photos by Dan Fergus
from a RISD Hoops practice at
Wheeler School. December 1987



Hoops" jerseys you guys wore. I've seen some other photos of RISD football jerseys, could you tell me the history of those?

RG

Yeah. the football jerseys were made by Edwin Kuo. He's a Korean-American guy from Scarsdale, New York who is really into sports and he understood the irony of RISD sports. We played a few pickup football games here and there but it was truly about the irony of having a bunch of football jerseys with "RISD" on the front. He must have made 20 or 30 of those things. I think they were pretty coveted.

RG

Do you know what happened to the team after you graduated? Did it continue for a few years or pretty much collapse once your friend group all left?

RG

It was limited to the time we were together. By 1989 it had petered out. There were some pretty talented underclassmen who were coming up as we left however. There was a guy named Chris Horvath. I'll never forget him, he was from upstate New York. He was a farm boy, probably five foot six inches, and he was the toughest player I've ever seen. He could just dominate a game.

You get to a point at your time in college where you start focusing on what you're gonna do afterwards, and I certainty wasn't gonna play basketball.

RS

Did you play after basketball after RISD?

RG

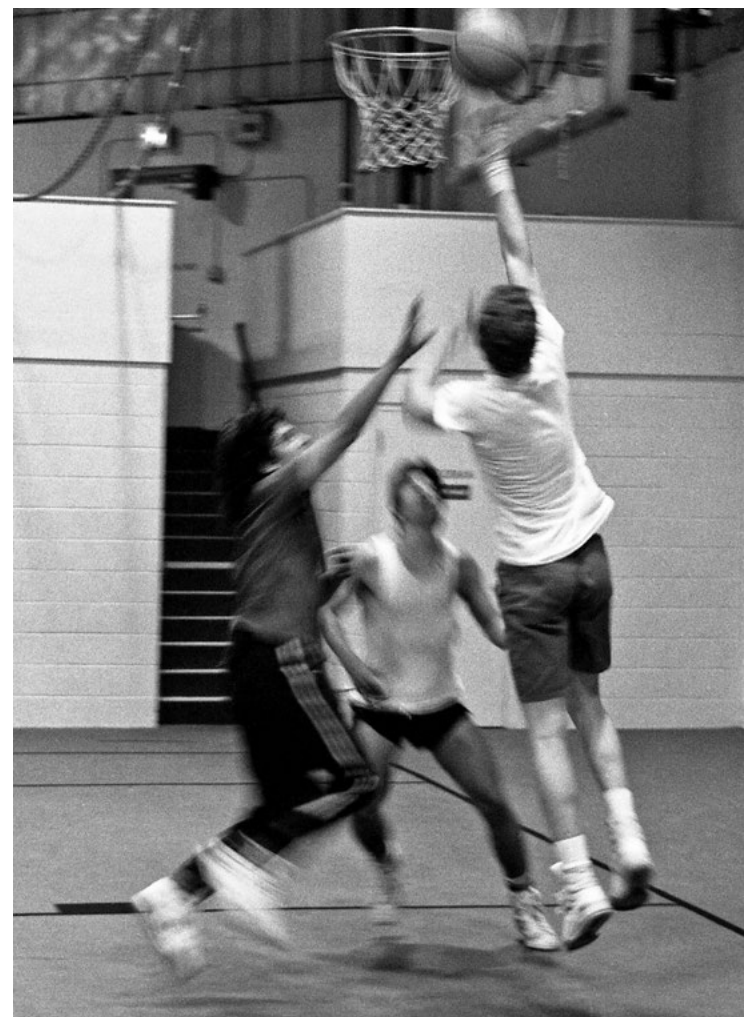
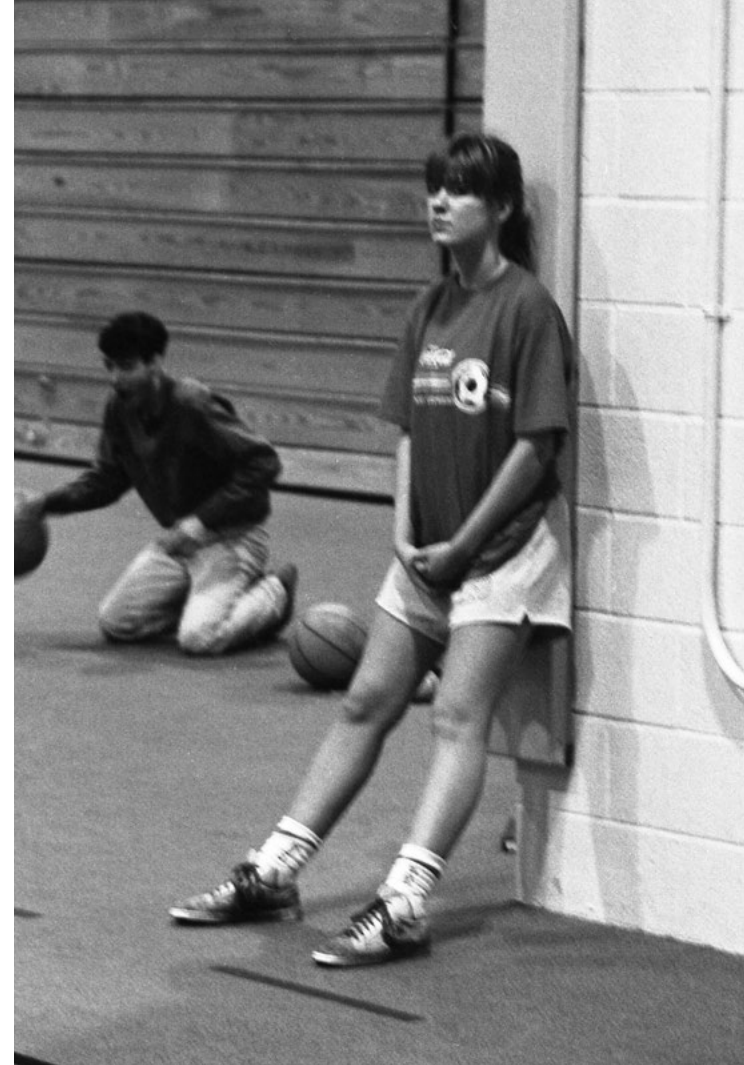
After graduation I moved to LA and played on some outdoor courts pretty regularly. Then when I moved to Chicago I found a gym where Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan used to play because it was on the way to their stadium. Since then I haven't played that much. To me it's always been about the artistry of a team working together, and that's the most amazing thing. I'm not the best player ever, but I fit into a team really well. That was one of my strengths.

RS

How do you view your basketball experience alongside your design practice? Has that time taught you lessons or influenced your work?

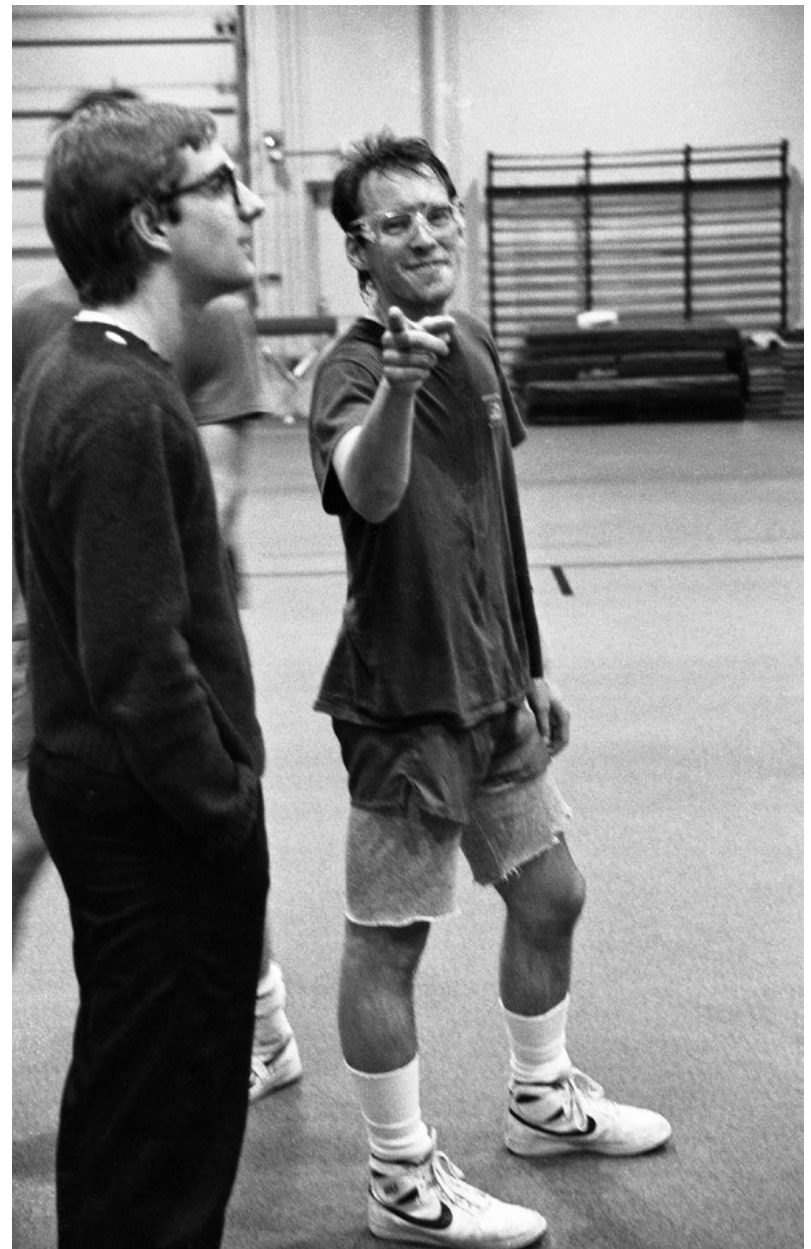
RG

Any sports team teaches you just as much about life as what you'll learn in the classroom arena. You





▲► Randy photographed by Dan Fergus. December 1987





◀ Randy's RISD football jersey as it looks today. c. 1988



▲ Edwin Kuo in his RISD football jersey. c. 1988

learn about hard work, practice, sacrifice, and working towards a goal you couldn't achieve by yourself. Besides Michael Jordan, you can't win a championship by yourself. You can't win alone. RISD was a particularly interesting dynamic, because you had to really want to play. The deck was stacked against you. You're up late in your studio, you're doing your work, and it's hard to stay motivated. It's not like there wasn't any partying, there certainly was. But we were up in the streets of Providence going to games or practicing while the rest of RISD was sleeping.

RS

As someone who was a part of a team at RISD and basically watched it grow from the ground up, do you have any advice for how current teams can operate within our "interesting" environment?

RG

▼ (Left to right) Randy, Edwin, and Scott in front of the Cow Mobile, Pisswater Beer in hand. c. 1988

We took a certain pride in being other in



a way. The idea of being a sports-focused group at RISD was something that ran against the grain. I'll just say that. It's not like we were being actively resisted in any way but there was certainly no cultural flow or administrative help besides the funds. Nowadays sports is a part of our creative and cultural landscape in a way that can be manifested in different ways. You see professional players now being creative on the court, you see the fashion in the pregame tunnels, and overall the subculture it's created.

At a place like RISD, art needs to permeate the sports culture. RISD is crazy if they don't think that having engaged athletic performers helps that. Combining those two areas allows you to get into rooms you couldn't get into before. You can have conversations that maybe you couldn't have had if you were just focused on the arts. It all helps to improve both your physical and mental well being, and makes you a fuller person. That is what I was really after.

RS

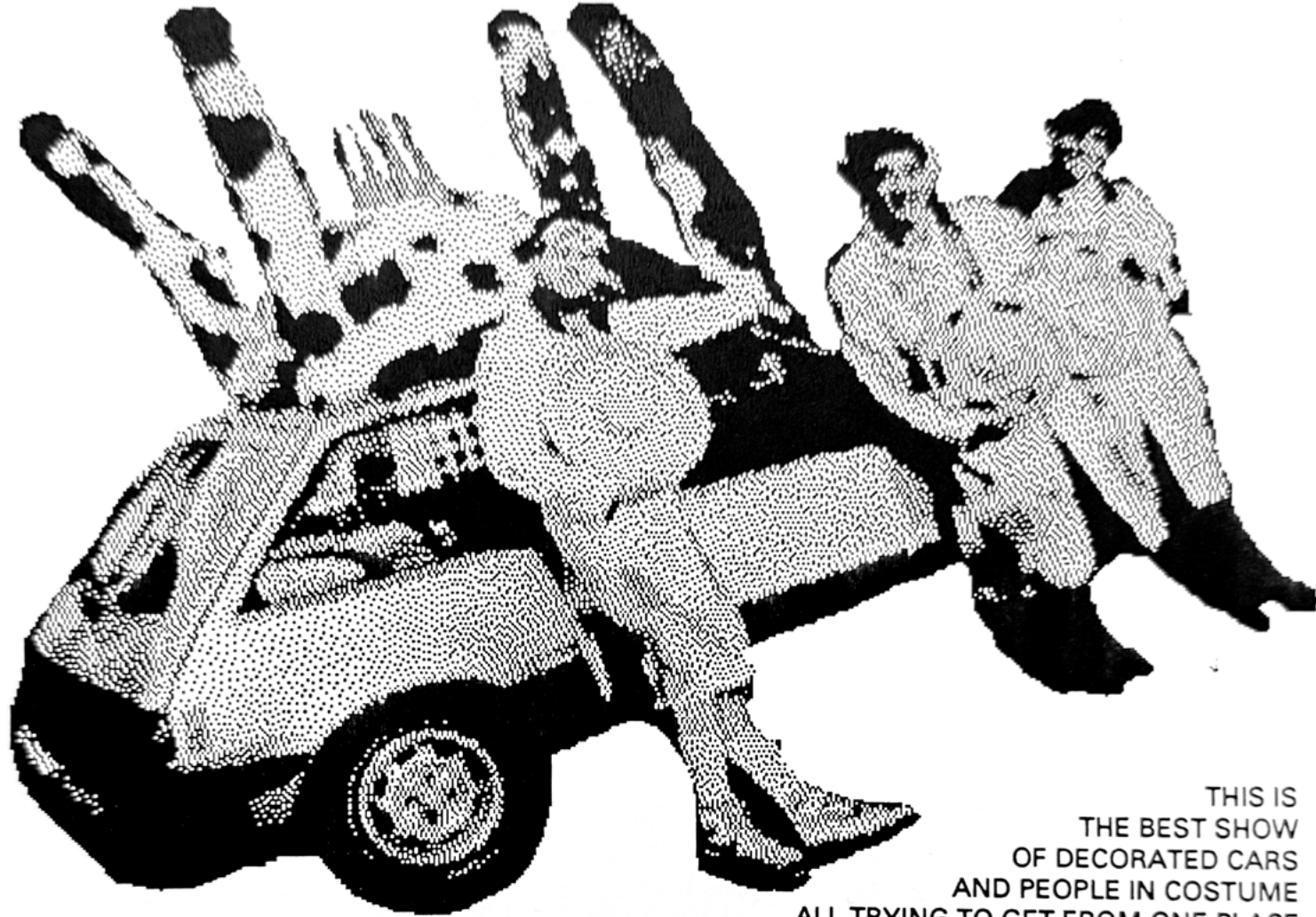
Speaking of this art and physical performance overlap, I've stumbled across this event held at RISD called the Pisswater Beer Road Rally that you were a part of. How did this event navigate this relationship with the school as being competition on the margins of "normal" student culture?

RG

Oh my goodness, you saw that? It was incredible, on multiple levels. It was organized by people who were older than me at the time. Peter was one of the guys, but I didn't know them well. They seemed

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far more mature than me. They were probably seniors then or even graduate students, I don't know. I was likely a sophomore or junior around the time it began. I believe it came up through the Industrial Design department with the help of my roommate Boise, whose real name was Alessandro Zeitza. They designed this entire Road Rally. It was a physical book of clues that each team is given and you basically drive all around Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts looking for the clues. It was an absurdly long distance, it might have been over a hundred miles. I lost track. Each clue in the book had one word statements and you just drove until you found wherever it took you to.

Now, there are a lot of roads in New England and Massachusetts, so you can imagine how easy it was to get lost and fail. It was the most ridiculous, hardest thing I ever did, but yet, some of us were able to finish it.

The amazing thing about it was that it was a great example of what RISD students would do if they got hold of racecars, right? You saw some of the decorated cars I'm sure. One year our car was

a dead cow we made out of foam rubber. We had gone to some foam rubber place and dumpster dove until we found all the material

◀ A flyer promoting an upcoming iteration of the Pisswater Road Rally event. May 1989

▶ The original Pisswater Beer label. c. 1986

▼ The Squid Mobile. c. 1988

we needed and made this giant upside down cow. Another year we were a giant squid, probably fifteen feet long, with flailing foam tentacles in the shape of a Dodge Colt. It just added an element of theater to it all.

It ultimately wrapped up at Boise's house I think, or one of his family's homes in Cape Cod or Little Compton or somewhere around there. At that point you didn't know it was ending and then suddenly you were on a beach and you turned a corner and there's a big sign saying "Road Rally Finish". It was the most exciting event of the year by far.

I think I still have some of the custom beer bottles we made. I'm sure Edwin has that stuff, he's sort of an archivist of these kinds of things. He has all of the Pisswater stuff, the RISD football stuff, and the Cow Lovers Association stuff.





RS
Cow Lovers Association?

RG
That was a ridiculous thing. It started in 1985 and went until 1989 and was pure absurdity. I was a part of it, unfortunately, but it was really just an excuse to have off campus parties. It started during my freshman year back when they were still building South Hall. We would smuggle alcohol in through the construction site, through windows, and through the basement of Nickerson.

Anyway, we just wanted a name for our group and came up with the RISD CLA, Cow Lovers Association. That then spawned four years of massive propaganda at RISD. It was a little like the "Andre the Giant Has A Posse" thing that Shep [Shepard Fairey] was doing with the paste ups on billboards, except we were plastering campus with cows. It turned into a vehicle to rally people around an icon and throw parties, have bands play, and have fun. It had almost no meaning, but it brought people together.

RS
I love hearing these kinds of stories, because it feels like a lot of these legendary groups and infamous things went away with social media and the idea of things lasting forever online now. People are less open to just doing these ambitious stunts or spur of the moment things because it may come back to bite them when looking for a job. I think many people are afraid to create work for the sake of joy and fun with your friends and want stuff that will just look good in your portfolio.

To me, the Balls and the Nads feel like the last vestiges of this era that seemed to peak in the 80s and 90s and the theatrical attitudes you all shared. Were there any kind of infamous theatrics or big performances at basketball games like the ones you've talked about so far?

RG
Not really. I mean, one guy played in a dress every game, but that just seemed normal, you know?

There weren't any crafted theatrics at our games like the Road Rally or the Cow Lovers. It was more about people being their authentic selves. Maybe that was a missed opportunity, but we were just trying to stick together at that point in the process.

It's interesting what you say about the tentativeness around diving into an experience. I don't want to be the old guy who says everything

◀ (top to bottom) The PW Bug, Cow Mobile, Batcar, Helga, and Randy with some friends in front of their CLA Cow Mobile. c. 1988

was great before social media, but there were very few photos of the things we did. I have a few albums and so does Edwin and the others, and it's not like photography hadn't been invented yet. But at the same time, we never felt we were in danger of overexposing ourselves. We knew the risks and were ready to deal with the consequences. We never feared someone was going to tweet out a photo of us partying and report us. We knew how to let ourselves have a little bit of fun and be a part of the overall experience.

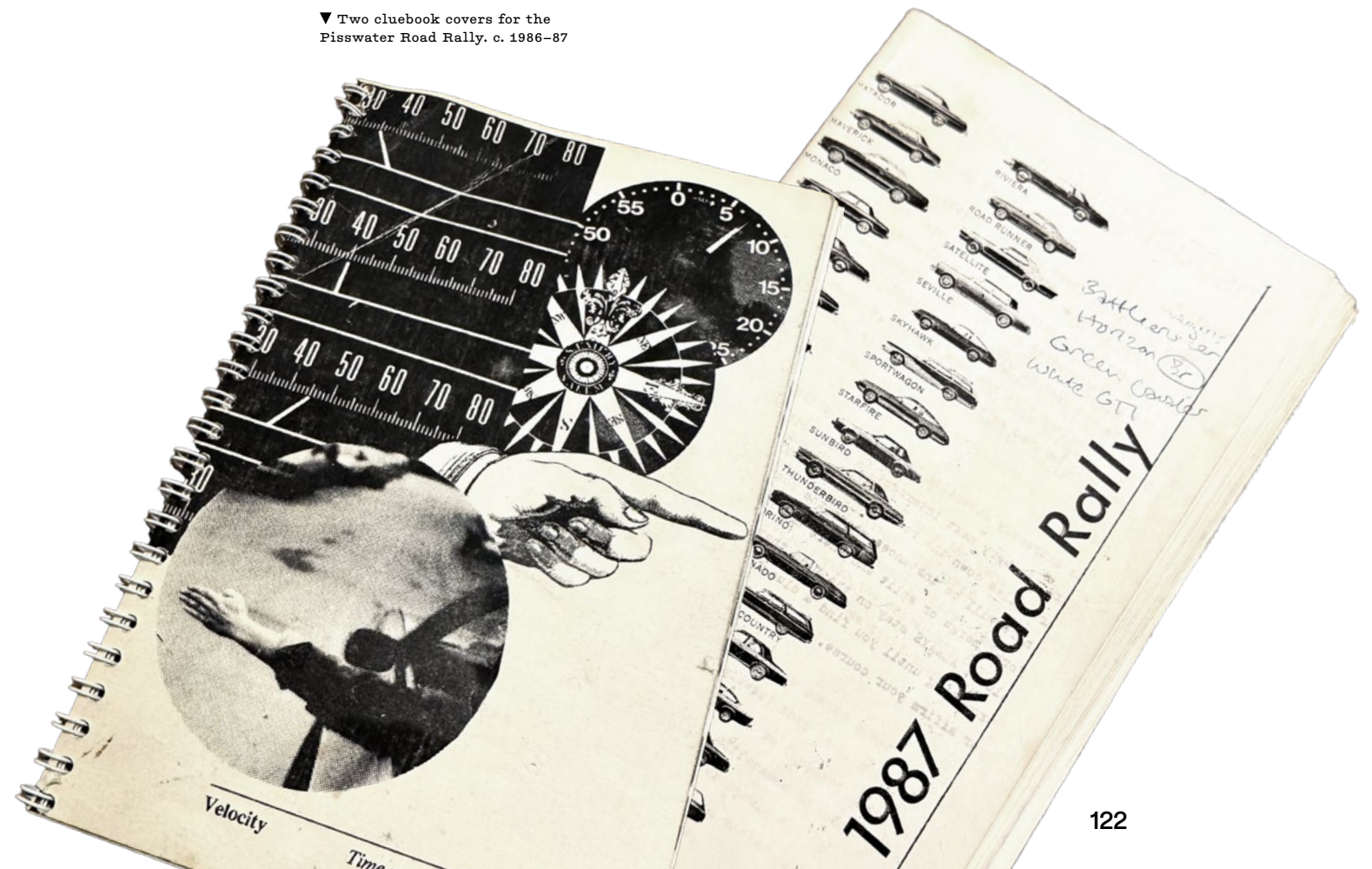
RS
Yeah, in recent years I feel like the school itself has begun to really crack down on all facets of its public image, and one of those was ending the sale of club team merch in the school store. That's one of the big reasons why I think preserving these stories is so important, because it truly is a part of the history and culture of RISD, even if you aren't fully aware of it. I don't know whether they want to act like these things never happened, or if the names are too inappropriate, but it's an honest representation and product of who we are. You lose a part of what it means to be a RISD student by taking that away from the public eye.

RG
There's an incredible opportunity for a deeper dialog about that. I'm not even talking about basketball anymore, but really the parts of our pasts that sometimes appear incongruous with what's happening today. With RISD being such a pre-eminent, if not the most preeminent, art school in the world, they play an important part in that conversation.

I know it's easy to say that the names or the mascot are inappropriate, I'm not disputing that, but these are a part of the larger history of the school. I know that many schools had to deal with how they used Native American representation for their mascots and had those conversations, but I don't think RISD has had that fair conversation with itself.

RS
It feels very hypocritical to me to be an art school by definition but pick and choose what work to celebrate, especially if it "goes against the grain" as you mentioned earlier. During my time at RISD I saw a student-led exhibition held in a building on campus censored by the school after someone from the community complained. It felt like we were heading in the wrong direction when it only

▼ Two cluebook covers for the Pisswater Road Rally. c. 1986-87

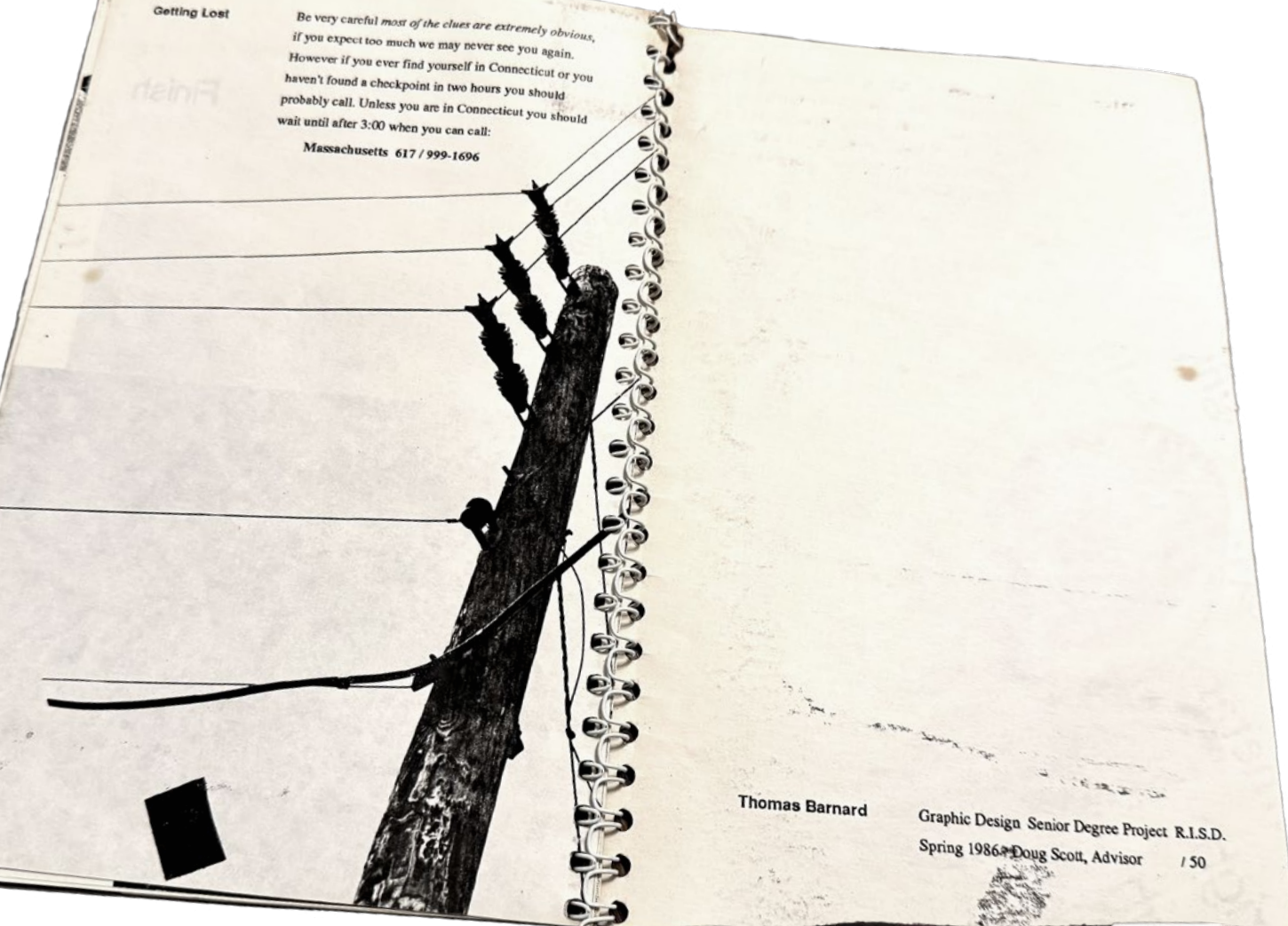




***It's easy to say that the names
or the mascot are inappropriate
but these are a part of the larger
history of the school.***

***– Randy Guillot
90 BArch***





took a single tweet to take it down. How much are you willing to bend to whatever others think? Twenty years from now, how will the institution look back on itself? When I tell alumni who played on the Balls decades ago that we don't publicly sell the merch anymore, they're really disappointed.

Everything we make now is student-led. Recently we've been able to get approval for giveaway items but nothing as big as putting our merch in the store again. But I pay for everything I make and use the money I earn from selling the merch to fund other crazy stuff. It's like the Road Rally or the jerseys, you may get a little funding here or there, but if you really want to make something different, it has to be done entirely by the students.

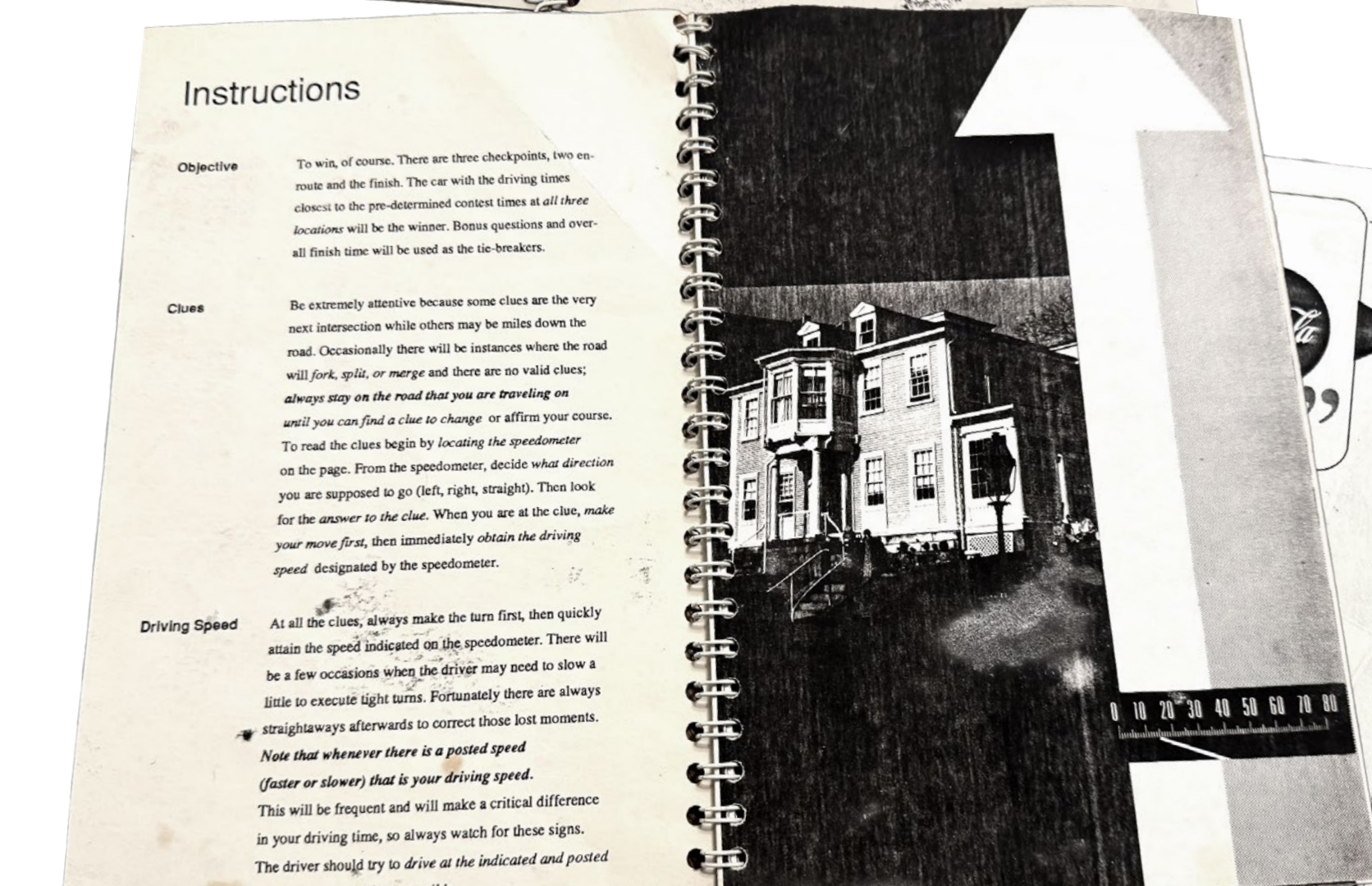
RG

Some of that's consistent with the way it's always been. Once you start to become really underwritten by the school, you might lose some of your independence anyway. I think it needs to be recognized and celebrated, but be careful what you wish for, you know? Then you become beholden to certain ways of being and doing things.

The second things become too glossy and homogenized or sanctioned by RISD, it becomes less RISD in a way. I don't know. I'm not suggesting you go full on guerilla, since you still need some support from the institution. But the ideas don't come from committees and funding, they come from committed people who are willing to invest

their own selves to make the ideas real and test them out.

I was lucky enough to be around RISD when Shepard Fairey was doing the Andre the Giant stuff. It started as this secret nighttime activity but now it's a whole icon and brand identity. None of that happens without committed people doing things that someone tells them they shouldn't be doing.

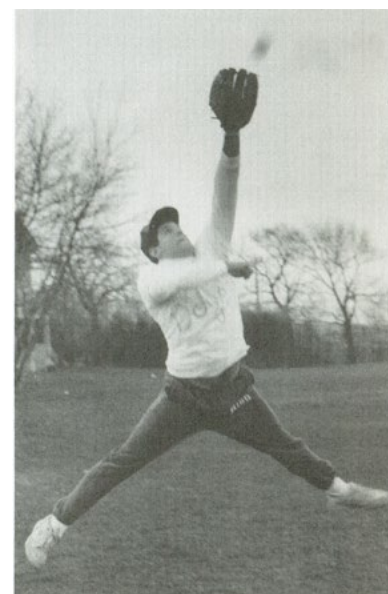




▲ During the late 1980s into the early 90s, a baseball club was also a part of RISD, called "The Cats and Dogs", documented here in the yearbook.

Continues on following two spreads. c. 1991





2000-2015

DO YOU LIKE TO PLAY WITH BALLS?

Much of the detailed history of the Balls, from its founding to more recent stories, can be read in full in the designated interview sections, but I would still like to tell an overall narrative as best as I can with these written sections.

As mentioned before, there was no basketball team at RISD around the turn of the new millennium, or really any organized sports teams besides the Nads. During the fall semester of 2000, freshman RISD student Joe Gebbia came to campus and was told that RISD had no basketball team. Being someone who grew up with a love for the game and didn't want that journey to end with college, Joe went straight to Carr House on Benefit Street to meet with the Office for Student Life (OSL). They were the modern equivalent of the Center for Student Involvement (CSI) and were in charge of organizing extra-curricular activities and events around campus. Joe met with an OSL employee who told him that although RISD did not have a basketball team, he was more than welcome to start his own, but he would need

BASKETBALL

Do you play?

Read on...

RISD is putting together a basketball team, rightly named The Balls...and it's open to BOTH GIRLS & GUYS. Practice begins over wintersession, so take the break to polish up your jump-shot. If you've got game, knee high socks, and a thirst to win RISD style, put your name and number below. (Ability to dunk optional, but preferred).

Name

Phone

For more information contact Student Life in the Carr House

the names of at least twelve students to join him. Shortly after, Joe printed posters advertising his vision for a new basketball team at RISD.

Later, in a December 2, 2000 issue of RISD magazine *Mixed Media*, a similar ad was published titled “Do You Like to Play With Balls?” As Joe spread posters around campus, especially the freshman dorm quad, he began to get phone calls from students on his dormroom’s landline. After collecting the twelve names, he returned to OSL and was told that he then had to go to the Student Alliance to have the organization approved. The following Wednesday night, he went to the Alliance’s meeting in the Taproom, a gathering space on the top floor of Memorial Hall housing the painting department, and proposed the team. The Alliance voted and the club was approved.

The next step was to find a gym. Though not on their Hope Street campus, Joe and the rest of the new Balls made an arrangement with Wheeler School to use their fieldhouse in Seekonk, Massachusetts for practice. Every week, the team would load into a rented OSL van and drive to Seekonk for practice. Around this time Joe designed the original Balls logo, drawing inspiration from the cursive script and suggestive imagery of the Nads logo, this time using two basketballs bouncing around in a net instead of two pucks and a hockey stick. The team leaned towards red and maroon colors for branding, continuing the tradition of RISD sports since the early 20th century. To pay for jerseys, the team reached out to Johnny Rockets, a mid-50’s themed diner chain with a location on Thayer Street, to sponsor them. Anthony Petrie remembers many opponents and fans making fun of the advertisement, as instead of a player’s name on their back, it just said “Johnny Rockets” with the restaurant’s logo also adorning their plain black shorts.

Now fully branded and suited up, the next step was to play actual games instead of just scrimmaging against one another at practice. The following school year, Joe began reaching out to local colleges, even some Division III ones, just to find someone who would agree to play. Being the coach, captain, and manager of the Balls, Joe was the 19 year old face of the team, and was often ignored or laughed at by local programs who didn’t want to waste their time with a RISD basketball team. Eventually Clark University, a private university in Worcester, Massachusetts, agreed to have their junior varsity squad play the team. On a December night in 2001, the Clark University basketball team arrived at the Wheeler Gym in Providence, shocked to find that the man they had been coordinating that night’s game with was just a sophomore in college. The game obviously ended in a 94–49 blowout loss for the Balls, but in many ways it was a success. Not only had the team convinced a sizable crowd of 150 to attend the game, but for once they could consider themselves a legitimate team. The Nads also brought their cheerleading squad “The Jockstraps” to help support their genital brothers. A pair of students also commentated during the game, sitting behind the score table that held a banner with the RISD Balls logo and their motto “Ain’t no balls bigger than ours”. Other festivities of the night featured a tip off by RISD President Roger Mandle, a break dancing club performance



▲ The back of the first Balls jersey, featuring a not so well integrated ad for Johnny Rockets. c. 2001



► The first RISD Balls jersey. c. 2001

at halftime, and a half court shot competition for a \$100 gift card for the RISD Store.

The team held a few other games that year but many if not all ended in losses. On the Brightside, the Balls were noticed by *The Burlington Free Press* of Vermont in January of 2002 and featured in an article in their paper titled “Art students got game”. A copy of the article still hangs in the Student Fitness Center at RISD. In the article, multiple players were interviewed and Roger Mandle shared his thoughts, stating:

“Competitive sports here are more about participation and having fun than winning. Will we want to build a major stadium or major field house? Probably not.”

In March of 2001 the Balls also faced Cooper Union from New York, and quickly developed a rivalry. Their coach, athletics Dean Steve Baker, was a larger-than-life personality with a thick New Yorker accent and red face. The game was held on RISD’s turf and students made signs that read “Go Balls! Beat Pooper Union!” The Balls ended up losing by just six points, but the rivalry was born.



▼ Photos from the first Balls game against Clark University. December 7, 2001



GO BALLS!

The following school year, tryouts were held on October 2 at the Wheeler Gym, thirty-seven “student-athletes” attending. Steve Bailey was brought in to help coach the new and returning players. The first game of the season was scheduled for October 28 against Mass Bay CC, but the outcome of that game was not recorded, though a student band did perform. During this season the team also began playing Pratt, who have an official Division III program, so an unofficial art school conference was beginning to form.

The team was featured in an article in a spring issue of *RISD Blend* with writing by Joe Gebbia recounting a game against Cooper Union and Coach Steven Bailey sharing his thoughts on the team, believing “They are out there for the love and spirit of the game, not because of scholarships or ego. I admire these kids a lot.” The team also upgraded their jerseys that season, now having a matching shorts and jersey set with a white home jersey and maroon away alternate. One of these jerseys is framed and hangs in the Student Fitness Center, bearing signatures from many Balls players from those teams of the early 2000s. A photo of the team is also featured with Alon Andrews 05 FAV, Pelun Chen 03 GD, Caitlin Coreris 05 IL, Matthew Corrado 05 IL, Cameron Davis 05 IL, John Dawson 06 IL, Alkis Dikaios 03 MArch, Raymond Eng BArch 03, Joe Gebbia GD/ID 05, Calvin Louie 03 IL, Paolo Rivera 03 IL, Conor Thompson 05 PH, Adam Todd 03 FAV/IL, and Jonathan Wetzel 06.

During the fall of 2003, the Balls continued to grow within the RISD sports community, being featured in a Valentine’s-themed photoshoot in an issue of *RISD Blend* along with the Nads and the school’s synchronized swim team called the “Wet Dreams”.

Around this time, Joe Gebbia was doing some of his own research into the history of basketball at RISD, and was able to contact Bill Ewen and Joseph Cooke, who played on those “Red Devils” teams of the early to late 1960s. On October 10, 2003 (the day I was born, coincidentally) the Balls hosted their first annual Balls alumni game. The game featured mixed teams made up of recent graduates who played on the Balls, as well as some alumni from the 1960s who were there more for the experience. A halfcourt shot contest at halftime gave away “a trip to NYC” as well as RISD Store and RISD|Works merchandise. A custom pamphlet was also made for the game, featuring a broad history of basketball at RISD, a message from President Roger Mandle, and information about that season’s schedule and merchandise.

Participants included Cameron Davis 05 IL, Amanda Penecale 06 IL/PH, Andrew Gonzalez 07, Daniel Fitzpatrick 07, Francisco Rivera 04 MArch, John Dawson 06 IL, Andrew Yates 06 FAV, Joe Graham Felsen 07, Conor O’Donnell 06 PT, Joseph Ng 07, Daniel Donegan 06 GL, Joe Gebbia 05 GD/ID, Eric Sthal 04 MArch, Jorge Martinez 06 GD, Ken Tomita 06 MArch, John Sebelius 06 IL, Katherine Vergos 07, Matt Corado 05 IL, and Eric Telfort 05 IL. The alumni present for the game were Paul Guertin 72 GD, Rod Gaskill 66, Bill Ewen 63 GD, Adam Todd 03 FAV/IL, Joseph Cooke, Mike Esordi 91 GD, Pelum Chen 03 GD, and Wayne Sullivan 67. In addition to an ad promoting RISD Balls merchandise coming soon to the RISD Store, it was mentioned that all sales directly helped support the team, and the back of the program featured a mail-in form to directly donate to the team. Games scheduled for that season included





◀▶ A foam finger given away at the first game against Cooper Union. March 8, 2002.









► The RISD Balls featured in *The Burlington Free Press*, January 30, 2002

◄ (including two previous spreads) The RISD Balls vs Mass Bay CC, featuring a student band and breakdancing group. October 28, 2002



Joe Gebbia (foreground center), founder, coach and player on the first Rhode Island School of Design basketball team since 1953, is surrounded by his teammates during practice at the Wheeler Field House in Seekonk, Mass. Known simply as the RISD Balls, 14 students, including one woman, have joined Gebbia for weekly practices and a roster of eight games against universities and colleges throughout New England, some of which are Division III teams.

Art students got game

Rhode Island School of Design team shows a passion for basketball

By Siobhan McDonough
The Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Joe Gebbia wants to set the record straight: Art students can be athletes too.

"People think of art students as artsy-fartsy people who just like to paint," says the 20-year-old Rhode Island School of Design sophomore. "When they think of an art school, they don't think of sports."

You could call them the Bad News Balls, but Gebbia, a graphic design student from Atlanta, has taken his job seriously as founder, coach and teammate of the first RISD basketball team since 1953.

They're known simply as the RISD Balls, and they take to the courts wearing personally designed jerseys.

"One of my lifelong dreams was to play college basketball," he said. "This will be the closest I'll come to it."

Fourteen students —

including one woman — have joined Gebbia this season for weekly practices and a roster of eight games against universities and colleges throughout New England — some of which are Division III teams. The Balls play in an independent league.

There were no try-outs, no cuts. The only requirement, Gebbia says, was that players "had to have a passion for basketball."

"We take whoever says 'yes.' We have to get started somehow."

A shortage of athletes has not been one of the problems Gebbia's had to face in forming a basketball team at RISD. There are plenty of athletes there.

Getting the respect of other coaches, however, has proven more difficult.

"Sometimes they ask, 'Where's your coach?' When I tell them it's me, they don't always want to offer a handshake or acknowledge it," he said.

Last month, the Balls played against Clark University's junior varsity team (RISD lost 94-49). About 150 fans, including the RISD Jock Straps — the cheerleading squad — showed up at RISD's home gym to cheer them on.

RISD President Roger Mandle was tip-off guest, RISD break dancers performed at half-time and featured a half court shot competition for a \$100 gift certificate to the RISD store.

"Even fans from the other team started to cheer for us," said teammate Alkis Dikaos, 23, of Cyprus, Greece, wearing one of the team's maroon and white jerseys with its logo — two basketballs swishing through a net.

The Balls have lost two games and haven't won yet, but they remain optimistic.

"We practice three hours each week, meanwhile we play teams that practice every day. We have potential," Gebbia said.

Besides limited practice hours, the team isn't exactly working on the advantage of player height against other teams. The team's average height is 5'10" — with the shortest player standing at 5'4", and the tallest at 6'3".

There are 2,000 students enrolled at RISD. Students spend long hours in studios and classrooms painting, etching, sculpting, photographing, designing and studying liberal arts courses.

Still, some students say athletics does have its place at the art institute.

"It's a good stress reliever," said Anthony Petrie, 19, a sophomore from Long Island, N.Y. "It's also a good way to meet people."

RISD is not the only art school in the country that offers sports programs to its students. Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, Pratt in Brooklyn, N.Y., Cooper Union in New York City, and the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan all offer sports — some are even nationally ranked in Division III athletics.



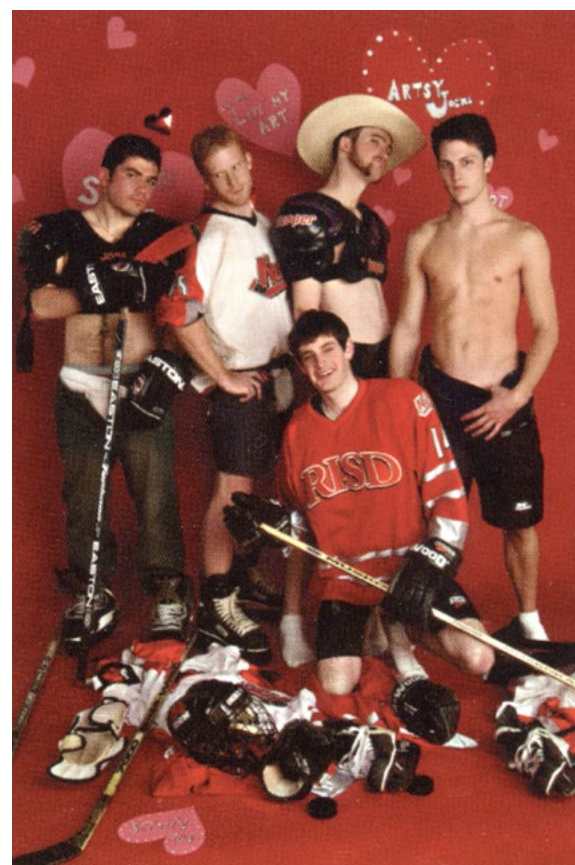
Rhode Island School of Design art students practice basketball in Seekonk, Mass.

RISD doesn't have an athletic department, so its Student Life Department oversees organized sports — including men's soccer, formally known as the Sacks, the women's soccer team called the Jugs, the Nads hockey team and synchronized swimming. None is NCAA ranked.

"Competitive sports here are more about participation and fun than about winning," said Mandle. But, he says, "Will we want to build a major stadium or major field house? Probably not."



▲ The Balls team with their new jerseys. c. spring 2003
 ◀ Coach Steven Bailey. c. spring 2008
 ▶ The Wet Dreams, Nads and Balls in a Valentine's photoshoot. c. fall 2003



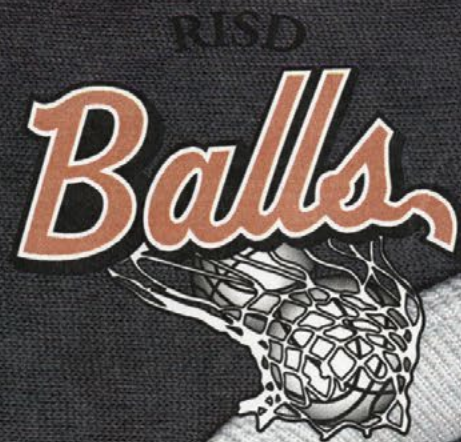


▲ A photo of the team during a huddle with Coach Bailey. c. 2004



▲ A group photo from the first annual Balls Alumni game. October 10, 2003

12



**1ST ANNUAL
RISD ALUMNI
BASKETBALL GAME**

FRIDAY 10:00PM

**WHEELER GYM
(MEETING AND BROOK ST.)
FREE W/STUDENT ID
\$2.00 AT THE DOOR**

**HALFCOURT SHOTS TO
WIN A TRIP TO NYC!
WIN RISD STORE AND
RISD|WORKS MERCHANDISE!**

**ENJOY THE GAME COURTESY OF:
OFFICE OF STUDENT LIFE!
THE RISD STORE!**



▲ The first official Balls shirts,
sold during the 2003–2004
season and later in the RISD
Store. c. 2003



▲ A poster for a Balls vs Faculty game, featuring a pair of Balls knee-high socks that the original team wore. January 9, 2004

◀▶ Although most other RISD Basketball teams defaulted to red or maroon uniforms, much of the early Balls accessories were blue and yellow, like these sweatbands, now in the possession of 2nd Life in the RISD Design Center. c. 2001





▲ Alumni game and other Balls merchandise, now in the possession of the RISD Archives. c. 2003–2004

◀ Shirts for the second annual Balls vs Alumni game, which coined the term “Ballumni”. October 2004

Montserrat College of Art, Art Institute of Boston, RISD Faculty/Staff, Mass Bay CC, Cooper Union, and Cape Cod CC. A schedule graphic and merchandise ad were shared in the RISD magazine *Mixed Media*.

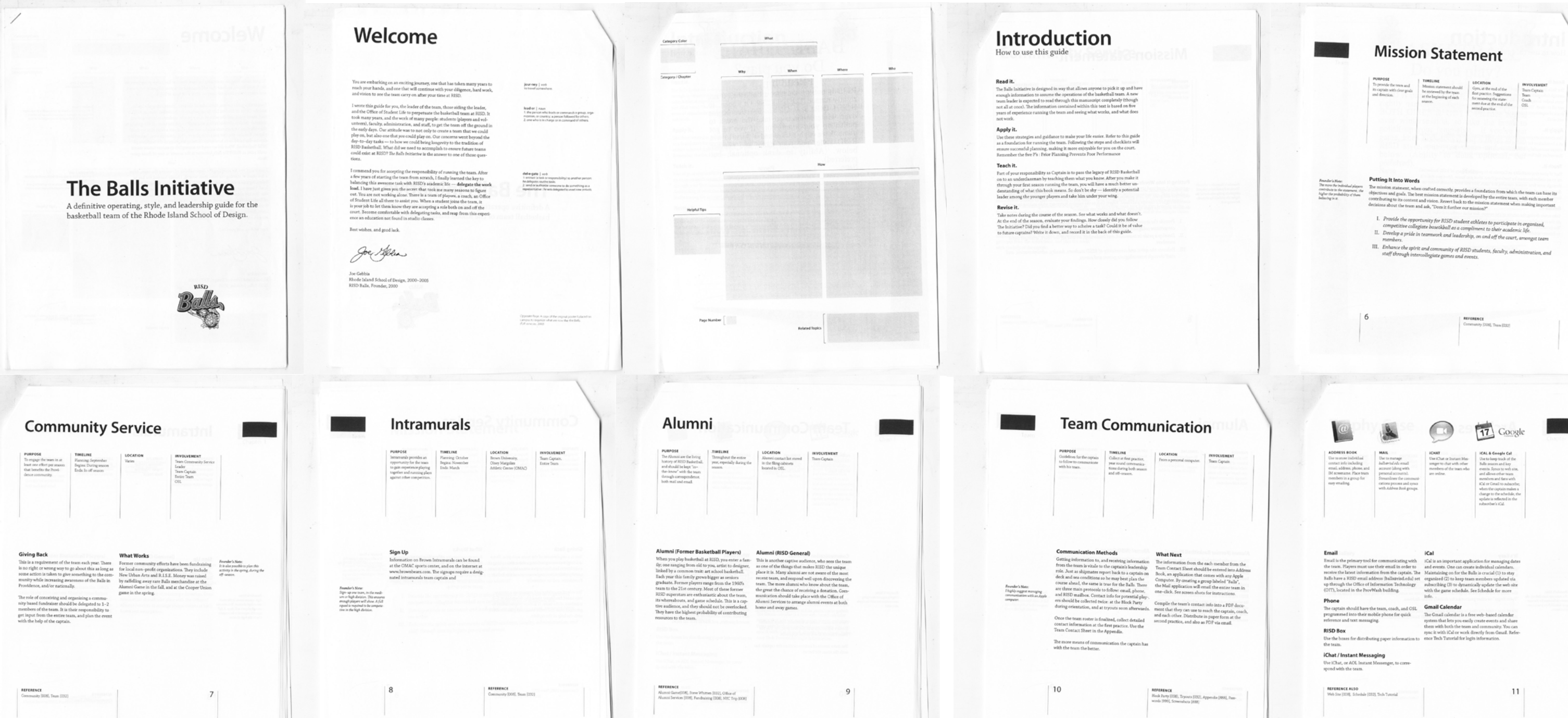
THE BALLS INITIATIVE

Upon Joe Gebbia's graduation in 2005, he left behind a detailed document that outlined every aspect of successfully running the Balls, so that future players could help the team flourish. Ironically I only heard of this document directly from Joe himself, and was able to find a few copies of the packet buried in a closet in the Student Fitness Center. The document, titled "The Balls Initiative", covered everything from club fair set up, to merchandise and promotion, to budgeting and so on. It is very thorough in its discussion of each topic, and is well designed. Instead of trying to relay advice from twenty years ago through my own words, refer to the accompanying scans for an idea of its scope. In some instances I think the instructions are a little too strict, and

overlook some of the spontaneity that comes with new students trying out new things, but overall it helped establish the foundation of what the club could become, and supported it as it grew over the decades.

WHO'S THE COACH?

By the 2006–2007 school year, the Balls brought in a coach from The Wheeler School to help out. The team for that year included Peggy Sue Deaven, TJ Reighart, Dan Fitzpatrick, Joe Graham Felson, Phillipe Previl, Brad Rabkin-Golden, Greta Scheing, Mike Townsend, Jesse Thompson, Dave Schacter, Everett Williams, Andrew Yates, Ben House, Brandon Cebenka, Brian Lee, and Jake Sproul. Some accounts of the team during this era don't have the most fond memories of this coach, saying he was too strict on the team, but it was hard to deny that he was a good coach who knew the game well. In a fall 2006 issue



Archives

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To keep an ongoing record of the basketball team through the RSD Archives Office.	Throughout the season.	Archives Office OSL	Team Captain Power Designer OSL Sports Coordinator

It's Easy

From 1969 - 2020, basketball at RSD was non-existent. There may have been teams during those 51 years, but they did not leave a paper record on campus. That means the next group of players had to develop from scratch. The Archives is an office on campus whose purpose is to retain a history of RSD's past. The goal of the Ball is to grow and maintain itself in the long run, and by leaving a "paper trail", future team leaders will have all the information needed to operate the Ball. It is important for the team to make copies of important documents, print an extra poster or two, and place aside an extra "team finger" or other provisions for delivery to the Archives.

It's no easy - take the time to put extra items aside and drop them off with Archives. That's it. A very simple way to ensure the history, and future of RSD Basketball continues on.

Trophy Case

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To house and showcase RSD sports memorabilia and accomplishments.	Throughout the year.	RSD House, 2nd Floor	Team Captain Basket Team

Your Gallery

This wooden and glass cabinet did not come easily, so take good care of it. The Ball is entrusted with maintaining its presence and content. Use it to show off the latest trophy, photos, uniforms, etc. Any removed content should be taken directly to Archives for storage.

The key is in possession of the RSD Store Manager.

Student Alliance

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To represent the team to the RSD Student Government.	The academic school year.	Student Alliance meeting room.	Team representative

It Works Both Ways

The Student Alliance is the governing student body on campus. They represent the students to the administration of the college. In addition, they head all student clubs and organizations which includes athletics. This is the group that approves your budget. In order to receive funding, they require one representative from each club or team to attend the bi-weekly Student Alliance meetings. SEND A BALLS PLAYER. Perfect attendance will be reflected when you sit down to discuss money for next season.

One Person, Two Functions

The team representative has two responsibilities. The first is to show up and share Ball events with the Student Alliance (who will then advertise for you). The second is to take brief notes on what is taking place on campus, and share those notes with the team at the next practice. It's not hard, plus they serve food at each meeting.

Budgets

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
A season with cheap, and someone has to pay for it. Provided you have a well thought out budget, they will.	Planning: Throughout season. Meeting: Spring (for next year's season)	OSL	Team Captain OSL Student Alliance

Do It Or Die.

The budget is the most commonly overlooked part of the process. I think this is because no student has ever had to create one. It's not hard, it just takes some thinking. The Ball is an expensive group. Think about the cost of a game: gym time, transportation, travel, food, gas, etc. Then think about practice, a coach, transportation, supplies, it adds up. And when it comes time to ask for the money to pay for these things, there will be many other hands reaching into the same pot. You will have to fight and defend what is yours in the finance meeting. Fortunately, you have a successful Ball history on your side. Refer to the budget in the back of this book, and ask OSL for help if necessary. Just get it done.

Why You Deserve More Than Them

The Ball is an organized group. Working together across the campus, the team accomplishes it's mission - to benefit players, students, the internal RSD community of faculty, staff, administration and alumni, and the external local community. This document is evidence of the long term commitment of the team to these groups. The Ball is not a spur-of-the-moment idea some sophomore has for a team and is now trying to get money to fund. The team consistently provides a commitment to the student experience at RSD. It adds to the culture of the college. It allows students a rare chance to have school spirit (this will confirm itself at the Cooper Union game). It creates just one more selling point for admissions to give that budding artist/high school athlete. It's a piece of the whole - makes RSD - different from other art schools. To continue this mission, you will need money, and compared to other student groups, lots of it.

Founder's Note:
Don't be afraid to over-estimate expenses. There is a limit to how far the unexpected during the season.

Founder's Note:
The coordinator should be paid before a game. The goal is to make sure the coordinator is paid before a game about a year in advance. - RSD

Founder's Note:
The Admissions Committee is a lot of people with a lot of power. It's a good idea to meet with a coach to make sure the coordinator is paid before a game about a year in advance. - RSD

Founder's Note:
I highly suggest having an Orientation Leader. They will have first contact with the incoming class.

Recruiting

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To prepare the existence of the team to always recruiting a list of new players through various, indirect recruiting methods.	Throughout the year.	OSL Wanda Curry (Admissions) Archives	Team Captain Basket Team OSL

Admissions Tour Guide

This is a work-study job involving guiding a group of prospective students and parents around campus. A typical tour takes only two hours. At least one member of the Ball should be a tour guide. Email Admissions in September to get involved.

Admissions Committee

The Admissions Committee is the deciding group on who gets into RSD. It is comprised of Admissions staff, faculty, and new students. The captain or co-captain should make every effort to be involved in this group. Sign-up in September through OSL.

Orientation Leader

The Orientation Leader's guide the freshman into life at RSD from their first day on campus, and throughout their first year at RSD. At least one member of the Ball should be an Orientation Leader. They will have first contact with the incoming class.

Freshman Open House

This event is run by Admissions in the spring. Held in the Auditorium, potential students and parents listen to presentations given by the campus departments. The highlight is the end, where current students sit on stage and answer audience questions. In addition to being a lot of fun, you can be the one who proudly answers the annual question, "What is there to do outside studio?"

Postcard In Admissions

A professionally printed postcard featuring the team on the front, and a short team summary on the back should be placed with permission on the front reception counter in Admissions.

Postcard In OSL

The same postcard should also be placed on the front reception counter in the Office of Student Life.

Balls Gift Package

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To promote the team to potential players and valuable visitors to campus.	Throughout the year.	On-campus	Team Captain Basket Team Director of External Communications

Potential Players

Although going as far as to recruit players with gifts is a rare event at RSD, the opportunity has happened in the past. There are students who play serious high school basketball. They will find you either through the Admissions Office or the Ball email. Their dilemma is usually athletic and artistic talent, without wanting to give up either.

A package should include team merchandise, information, press/news articles. If the prospective student visits campus, you should gather members from the team and meet the student in Admissions. Introduce yourself, your teammates, and then... just talk. Tell them about life at RSD, what it was like freshman year, stories about studio, and of course, how much fun it is to play competitive basketball at one of the top art and design schools in the country.

VIP's

RSD draws in many important people to campus through out course of the year. They are professional artists and designers, musicians, politicians, corporate executives, and many others. They come to lecture, guest, critic, and portfolio review among other things. Make the effort to get them a piece of Ball merchandise as a gift on behalf of the school, and the team. You will be promoting the team and extending a friendly gesture all at the same time.

Founder's Note:
Something great can be just as beautiful as something like. Remember when your career will take the team merchandise back to.

Founder's Note:
Stay informed on other artists showcasing through Pressbooks, and if desired merchandise, get a piece of merchandise to them.

Founder's Note:
Use personal judgment to give a potential freshman a sense of what is like on campus. If necessary, make sure to give the meeting as well.

Block Party

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
The block party is a chance for students, faculty, and staff to meet, mingle, and enjoy the school. It is a chance to meet, mingle, and enjoy the school. It is a chance to meet, mingle, and enjoy the school.	Planning: Summer Begin: September	Benefit Street	Team Captain Basket Team OSL

The Future Depends On It

The block party is organized by OSL to allow students to sign-up and become involved in clubs and organizations. Usually, the event is the team's first exposure to brand new freshmen, transfers, and grad students. Be ready to answer their questions and share your experience as a student athlete. Failure to bring on young players each season will result in the downfall of the team.

The number one concern and hindrance that keeps a new student from pursuing the team is fear of not having enough time for academics. Reassure them about the low time commitment, and give examples of freshman to Architecture grad students who have successfully balanced studio life and the Ball.

Key Points

Why would someone want to join the team?
• Low time commitment
• Become part of a close group
• Meet friends from all departments
• Play other art schools in collegiate basketball
• Be a part of a very unique team
• The privilege to wear a Ball uniform

Merchandise

The table at the block party is also a chance to retail new merchandise to the student body. Get creative - try face painting the Ball logo, or handing out stickers to visitors to the table.

Block Party Checklist

April
☐ Plan the budget with OSL
☐ Review current stock of merchandise
☐ Order new items

1 WEEK

☐ Team sign-up sheet
☐ Prepare handout with contact info
☐ Prepare handout with Ball Breaker 3-on-3 info
☐ Prepare photocopies of season schedule with gym map on back
☐ Prepare price sheet
☐ Prepare team uniforms
☐ Email team reminder about the event

1 DAY

☐ Printed schedules with email, gym map, and web site
☐ Team sign-up sheet
☐ Merchandise (clothing, bumper stickers, other non-apparel items)
☐ White table cloth
☐ Price list printouts
☐ Boombox with music (when appropriate)
☐ Extension cord
☐ Basketball
☐ Team uniforms (white jersey, red jersey, shooting shirt)
☐ Photocopied news articles or recent press
☐ Cash box with change

Balls Breaker (3-on-3)

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To provide an "ice-breaker" for new students to socialize around basketball, and let everyone on campus know about the team.	Planning: Summer Begin: September	Famous Outback Restaurant	Team Captain Basket Team OSL Coach

Sign Up

Information on Brown Intramurals can be found at the OMAC sports center, and on the internet at www.brownbeats.com. The signups require a designated intramurals team captain and.

Founder's Note:
Sign-up one year in advance. This means enough players will show up to fill a full season in required to compete in the high division.

Balls Breaker Checklist

4-6 WEEKS

☐ Sign-up for table with OSL
☐ Review current stock of merchandise
☐ Order new items

1 WEEK

☐ Team sign-up sheet
☐ Prepare photocopies of season schedule with gym map on back
☐ Prepare price sheet
☐ Prepare team uniforms

1 DAY

☐ Printed schedules with email, gym map, and web site
☐ Merchandise (clothing, bumper stickers, other non-apparel items)
☐ White table cloth
☐ Clipboard, pen, paper (for taking orders)
☐ Price list printouts
☐ Boombox with music (when appropriate)
☐ Extension cord
☐ Basketball
☐ Team uniforms (white jersey, red jersey, shooting shirt)
☐ Photocopied news articles or recent press
☐ Cash box with change
☐ Candy (for the kids)
☐ Order forms for custom jersey's

Alumni Sales

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To sell team merchandise, with proceeds going back to the Ball, and to spread awareness of the team to visitors at the sales.	Sale #1: October Sale #2: November Sale #3: April	Benefit Street Providence Convention Center	Team Captain Basket Team Alumni Office

Overview

The Alumni sales are an important event for the team to participate in. By selling Ball merchandise to RSD Alumni, students, and the general public, the team (1) generates responsible capital in the budget and (2) increases its exposure, by talking with personally, and through customers wearing their Ball gear. In addition to fresh merchandise, hand out any info about the team, including a season schedule, and map to the gym.

The success of a good sale depends on planning ahead to order enough merchandise, having each team member cover their shift at the table, and by being warm and approachable to everyone who walks by. Following these three steps to perfection once brought in \$700 for the team in one day.

Sale #1: Alumni & Parents Weekend

This Benefit Street sale is the largest and highest attended of all. The Alumni Office grants the Ball a complimentary table to promote the team, and the Alumni Alumni Basketball Game.

Sale #2: Holiday Sale

Held at the Convention Center in downtown Providence, the Ball has yet to participate in this sale. Arrangements should be made with the Alumni Office for a table situated inside or outside the ballroom.

Sale #3: Spring Sale

This warm weather sale, also on Benefit Street, takes place in the post-season.

Alumni Sales Checklist

4-6 WEEKS

☐ Reserve table with the Alumni Office
☐ Review current stock of merchandise
☐ Order new items

1 WEEK

☐ Team sign-up sheet
☐ Prepare photocopies of season schedule with gym map on back
☐ Prepare price sheet
☐ Prepare team uniforms
☐ Prepare handout with Alumni Game info
☐ Confirm table with Alumni Office

1 DAY

☐ Printed schedules with email, gym map, and web site
☐ Merchandise (clothing, bumper stickers, other non-apparel items)
☐ White table cloth
☐ Clipboard, pen, paper (for taking orders)
☐ Price list printouts
☐ Boombox with music (when appropriate)
☐ Extension cord
☐ Basketball
☐ Team uniforms (white jersey, red jersey, shooting shirt)
☐ Photocopied news articles or recent press
☐ Cash box with change
☐ Candy (for the kids)
☐ Order forms for custom jersey's
☐ Alumni Game info handout

Student Sales

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
To sell team merchandise, with proceeds going back to the Ball, and to spread awareness of the team to visitors at the sales.	Sale #1: November Sale #2: April	Two Mori Benefit Street	Team Captain Basket Team OSL

Overview

The student sales are a great time to sell merchandise to students and the community. You must sign-up for these in the Office of Student Life with out delay - they have a limited number of tables and will not hold one for the team. The fee should be included in the team budget.

Sale #1: Winter Sale

Usually located above the Mori, this winter sale can bring in additional revenue for the team. Sign-up takes place in OSL.

Sale #2: Spring Sale

The biggest student only sale of the year. On Benefit Street, sign-up early in OSL.

Founder's Note:
Remember you're representing the team - be enthusiastic!

Student Sales Checklist

4-6 WEEKS

☐ Sign-up for table with OSL
☐ Review current stock of merchandise
☐ Order new items

1 WEEK

☐ Team sign-up sheet
☐ Prepare photocopies of season schedule with gym map on back
☐ Prepare price sheet
☐ Prepare team uniforms

1 DAY

☐ Printed schedules with email, gym map, and web site
☐ Merchandise (clothing, bumper stickers, other non-apparel items)
☐ White table cloth
☐ Clipboard, pen, paper (for taking orders)
☐ Price list printouts
☐ Boombox with music (when appropriate)
☐ Extension cord
☐ Basketball
☐ Team uniforms (white jersey, red jersey, shooting shirt)
☐ Photocopied news articles or recent press
☐ Cash box with change
☐ Candy (for the kids)
☐ Order forms for custom jersey's

Merchandise

PURPOSE	TIMELINE	LOCATION	INVOLVEMENT
Allows the team something to sell in order to raise money. Allows students to show support for their college basketball team.	Planning: July Year round	Team Captain Storage in OSL	Team Captain Basket Team OSL

It's Essential

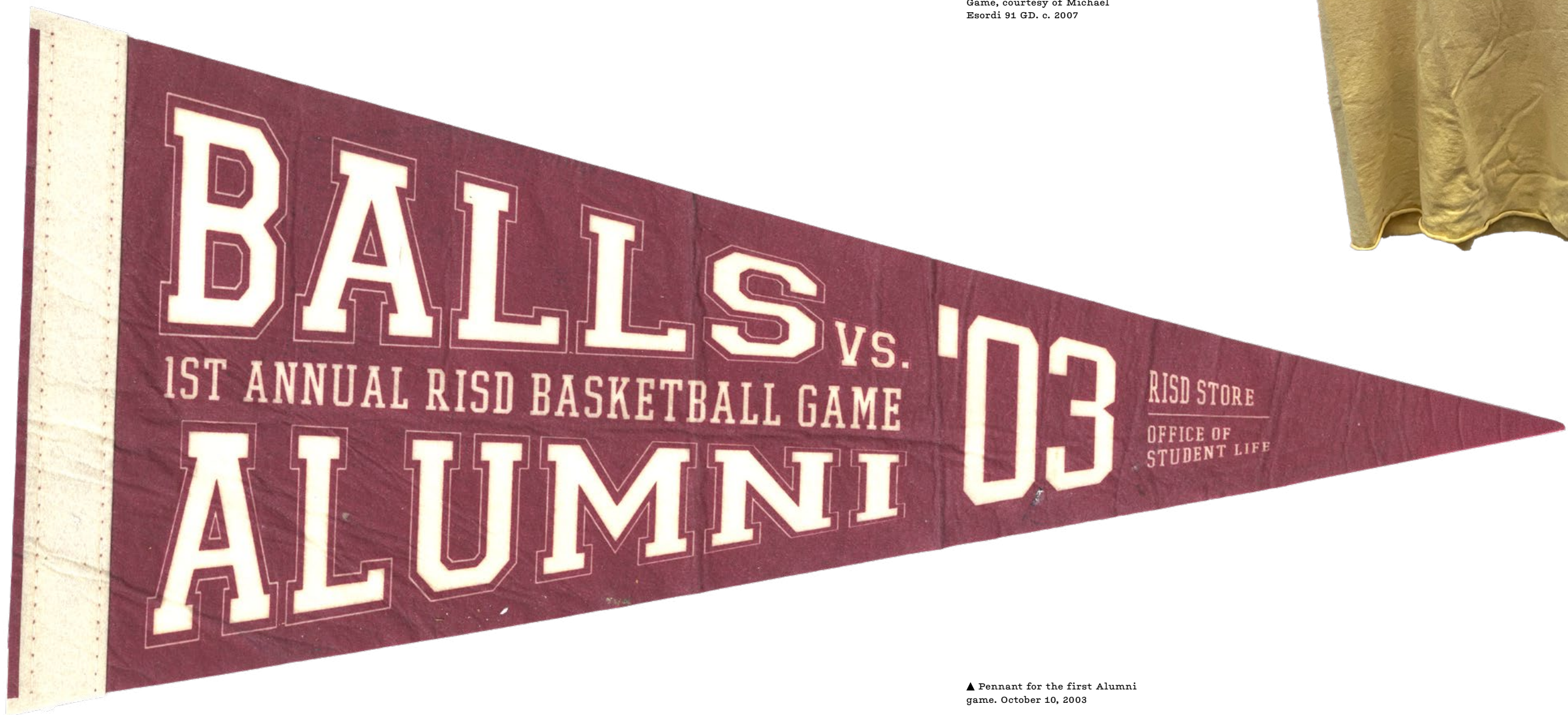
Merchandise does multiple things for the team: provides income, buzz around the team, and free advertising. The hardest thing about it is planning ahead, and even that's not very hard. Begin pricing items about 8 weeks before they are needed. Follow the timeline to the right for proper planning.

Items To Consider

Custom Jerseys
T-Shirts
Headbands
The Game Caps
Knitted Ski Hats
Long Sleeve T-Shirts
Hooded Sweatshirts
Tube Socks
Scarves
Banners/Underwear

How To Achieve Balls Gear Greatness

1. Identify what you want to make. Be novel. The team is unique, so should it's apparel, keeping in mind someone should want to buy it.
2. Price it. Reference the list of contacts in this document. Call ahead, get quotes, technical production information, and find out production time.
3. Get the funds. They should be in the budget. It's an investment. OSL will pay the upfront cost; you will reimburse them.
4. Design it. If there is not a Graphic Design major on the team, make friends with one. Hold a design contest for the student body.
5. Order it. Use the OSL credit card, and have it shipped to OSL. If you started in advance, you will not have to pay rush charges.



► Shirt from a Balls Alumni Game, courtesy of Michael Esordi 91 GD. c. 2007



▲ Pennant for the first Alumni game. October 10, 2003



of *Mixed Media*, writer Bradley Rabkin Golden 08 interviewed Balls player Jesse Thompson about the team's impressive 2-0 start to the season, with their most recent win coming from a November 19 game against Cape Cod CC.

Though their coach wasn't present for that game, Jesse believed that he was still a good influence on the team, stating "He really helps us to stay focused. There are parts of the game where things really start to come apart for us. Tonight that happened and we lost the lead for about ten minutes late in the game, and it's then that we need real leadership." Despite the sixteen names listed on scorebooks during that season, Jesse told the writer "we have a pretty solid 7 guys" so attendance may have been inconsistent and lead to further issues with play on the court.

The following October the RISD Balls Alumni game featured returning alumni like John Dawson, Brendan Loper, Joe Gebbia, Paolo Rivera, Adam Todd, Ron Russo, Mike Esordi, Ashley Comax, Nick Mouslaem, Vincent Hausmar, and Eric Telfort. On October 28 the Balls faced Sarah Lawrence at the Wheeler Gym, winning 50-49. However, the next three recorded games would end in losses to Pratt 61-44, Cooper Union, and another game against Cooper Union that March that ended 78-57.

▲ Another Balls Alumni Game. October 7, 2006

► A photo from the RISD yearbook featuring "Jock Jam" and other items. c. 2007





"His name is Bill Miller, he runs the school's painting studio, and how did he become coach of the RISD Balls? Was it a national search? Was it an extensive interview search? Had he been an assistant for years, paying his dues, waiting for years? How? 'The students knocked on my door', he says".

My interview with William "Bill" Miller goes more in depth about how he came to coach the team, his basketball philosophy, and why he ended up leaving a few years later, but in general it is important to note that Bill was nothing like the coach before him. I'm guessing that was the point, as the students who were tired of super serious basketball would rather have fun and lose than barely win and feel miserable. Bill knew the basic structure of the game and how to lead practice, but he was more focused on giving every member of the team time on the court and promoting games using his "15-20" rule that asked all 15 members of the team to recruit 20 of their friends to come to Balls games.

The team for the 2007-2008 school year included Brad Rabkin, Patrick Armstrong, TJ Reighart, James Blose, Patrick Groth, Everett Williams, Jonas Crisco, Luke O'Sullivan, Phillipe Previl (nicknamed Baby LeBron in the scorebook), Soaib Grewal, Martin Smick, Kabir Punoe, Coral Anderon, and Jesse Thompson. That season the team played at least Cape Cod CC, Cooper Union, and Pratt, but no other games were recorded in scorebooks or mentioned online. The first game against Cape Cod Community College in November was a 90-66 loss and at least one game against Pratt was dropped so maybe they didn't want to preserve that year as much.

Things did not seem to improve for the 2008-2009 team made up of Coral Anderson, Patrick Armstrong, Rose Curley, Ted Gahl, Patrick Groth, George Hoffman, Mike/Michael Kim, Nicholas Moussallem, Cooper O'Brien, Luke O'Sullivan, Gavin Simmons, Martin Smick, Un Man Chun, Liam V, Everett Williams, Toussaint Wallace, James Blose, Jacob Garcia, Akshat Ru, and John Verdency. Another game against Cape Cod CC ended in a 100-41 defeat, and other games against Sarah Lawrence, Pratt, and Cooper Union were likewise losses. Despite these hardships, what the team did have was style. After getting in contact with a RISD alum who worked at Converse in Boston, the team was gifted custom tracksuits and jerseys sponsored by Converse, along with free Chuck Taylors. Photos from games during this era still show large student crowds gathering at Wheeler as well, so despite the season records, the Balls were just as beloved as ever.

In February of 2009 the Balls were the subject of an article in the Brown Daily Herald titled "RISD's Balls play tough, 'stick together'" which was a reference to their motto "when the heat is on, the Balls stick together!" Written by Brian Mastroianni, the article detailed a recent loss to the Sarah Lawrence Gryphons and interviewed Don Morton, the associate director of OSL, as well as Balls players Cooper O'Brien and Coral Anderson and coach Bill Miller who stated "We play with as much passion as Duke, but without the full-ride scholarships. [...] creativity can find itself in almost every field in human endeavor."



▲ Photos from a game against Cooper Union at Wheeler School. c. 2007-2008

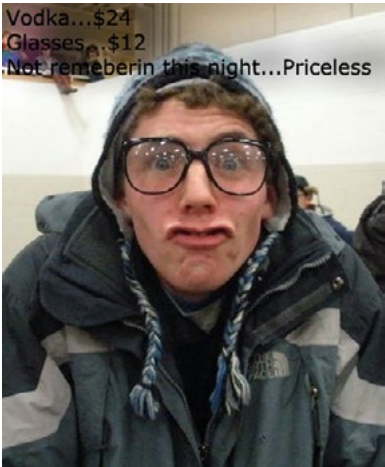
The following 2009–2010 season ended with a 5–3 record and games continued to be played against RISD’s art school rivals like Pratt and Cooper Union, but not much else was recorded about individual games or events. On March 16, 2010 a Balls vs Nads dodgeball game was hosted at Wheeler, being possibly the first and last formal collaboration between the two teams as of 2026. After this season, Bill Miller left and was replaced by Andrew Rogers, a cousin of Balls player Byron Olson 12 IL.

The next season opened with a 75–35 win over Sarah Lawrence, showing that a new era of the team was about to begin. A week later the team faced MassArt and defeated them as well in a 90–54 blow-out. However, despite these improvements, when facing their higher level art school rivals like Pratt and Cooper Union, they continued to come up short. The team that year included Byron Olson 12 IL, Cap Capuozzo, Cooper O’Brien, Gavin Engel, Gavin Simmons, Greg Norton, Henry Freel, Jacob Garcia, Justin Clemons, Stephanie DeVecchio, and Touissant Wallace.



◀ Photos by Tino Chow 09 ID from a game against Pratt, featuring a poster playing on Pratt's team name "the Cannoneers, and presenting them with RISD's own "cannon". January 16, 2009

► Posters promoting games throughout the season. c. 2009–2010





▲ Bill Miller (right) by the Balls bench before a game against Cooper Union. February 26, 2010

*Note: Most pictures from 2009-2010 season taken by Leonore McCarthy 12 PH.



▲ Students make signs for a game against Pratt at Wheeler School. February 5, 2010

◀ Touissant Wallace 13 BArch (#1) looks at Coach Bill Miller (center) during a huddle. February 5, 2010











◀▲ A game against Cooper Union at Wheeler School.
Continues on following spread.
February 26, 2010





▲ Students at the Balls vs Nads
dodgeball match.

Continues on three following
spreads. March 12, 2010









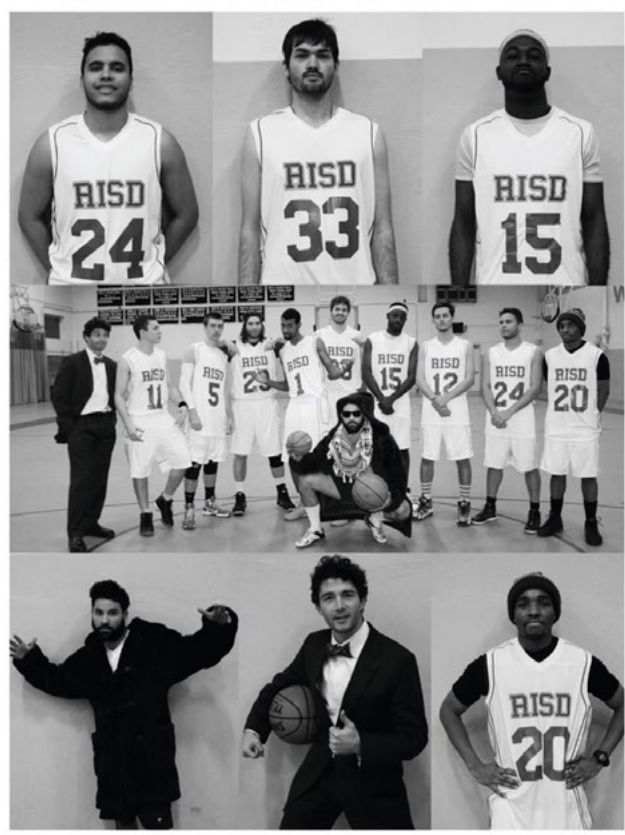
▲ Team photos. Left to right, top row: Touissant Wallace, Cap Capuozzo, Cooper O'Brien. Middle row: Gavin Simmons, Greg Norton, Henry Freel. Bottom row: Jacob Garcia, Justin Clemmons, Stephanie DelVecchio. c. 2010



▲ Posters promoting the Balls and games during the season. Continues on following spread. c. 2010–2011



WANTED



FANS WANTED FOR A TEAM OF BAD MOTHER\$&@!^#S
COME SUPPORT YOUR BALLS

WANTED



FANS WANTED FOR A TEAM OF BAD MOTHER\$&@!^#S
COME SUPPORT YOUR BALLS

RISD Balls

RISD BALLS vs. SARAH LAWRENCE
Wheeler Gym: Nov 13. 3:00 PM

Swoopin' Jerkin' Jivin'

Approved by RISD Center for Student Involvement



▲ A game against Sarah Lawrence at Wheeler School. January 14, 2012





▲► A game against Pratt at
Wheeler School.
January 20, 2012





▲ A game against the New School at Wheeler School. January 20, 2012



▲ Senior game against Cooper Union at Wheeler School. April 4, 2012



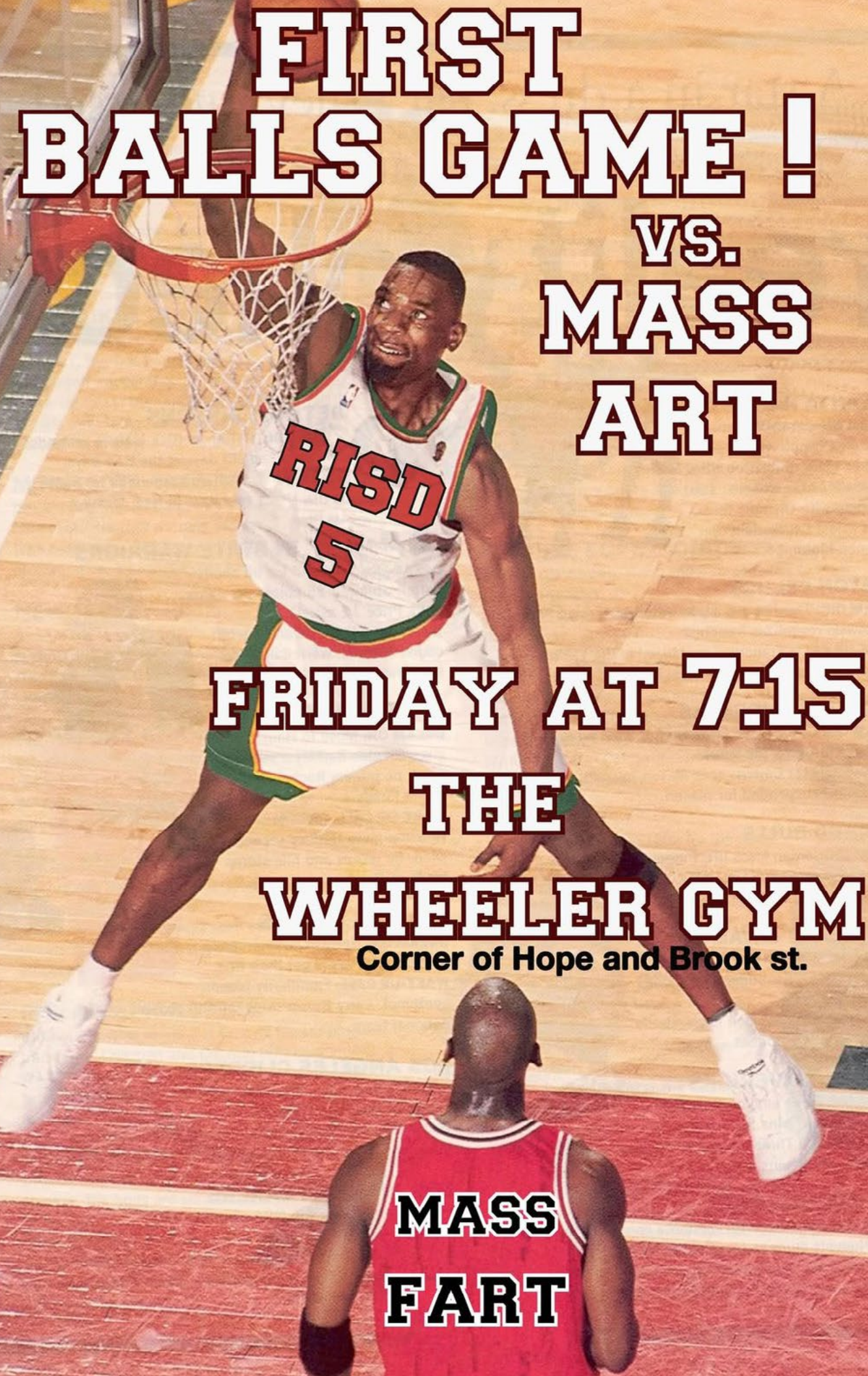
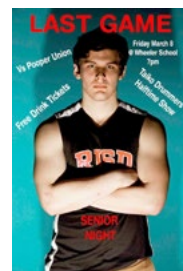
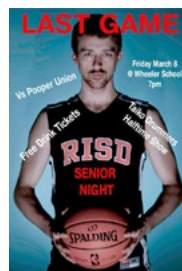
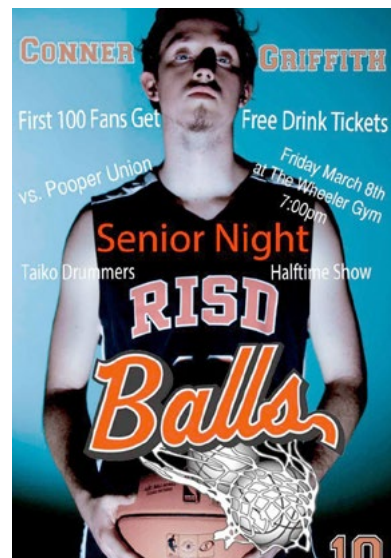
POOPER UNION MUST DIE

For the 2011–12 school year, the Balls received brand new white jerseys and organized games against Kings College, Pratt, the New School, Cooper Union, Sarah Lawrence, and MassArt. The team also helped out in the community, donating to a food bank during Thanksgiving and giving out free hot chocolate on the RISD Beach in January to promote upcoming games. Maybe all this good karma helped them out as they began the season going 5–0, but like every other year, they lost to Cooper Union. The team would end the season 7–3 in another game against Cooper Union where the Balls tied them at halftime but fell apart in the second half. The rivalry may have been one sided from Cooper Union's perspective but the Balls were still chasing that first win against the Eagles.

The 2012–2013 season was the first with Byron Olson as an assistant coach. Having just graduated last spring, he joined his cousin Andrew Rogers to help assist the Balls. The team opened the season with a win against MassArt, but fell short the following week in the first Balls vs Brown Club team game. Another win against MassArt improved their record to 2–1 but yet again Cooper Union beat the Balls 99–73. A note in the scorebook for that game read “No clapping, NCAA rules and regulations?” so I’m assuming the students who attended the game and helped keep the score were too ‘enthusiastic’ and pissed off the referees at the Baruch Intermediate School in New York. Two more games were played against Pratt in early 2013 with the teams splitting the series at one game a piece. The Balls faced the Brown Club team and lost again 87–62 but kept their spirits high for the Senior Game against Cooper Union on March 8. One hundred drink tickets for a Balls after party at the Salon in Providence were handed out at the game, and Japanese drum group Gendo Taiko from Brown University performed at halftime. The tradition of printing out graduating Balls heads for fans to wave around began at this game, but in the end Cooper Union defeated the Balls 63–42.

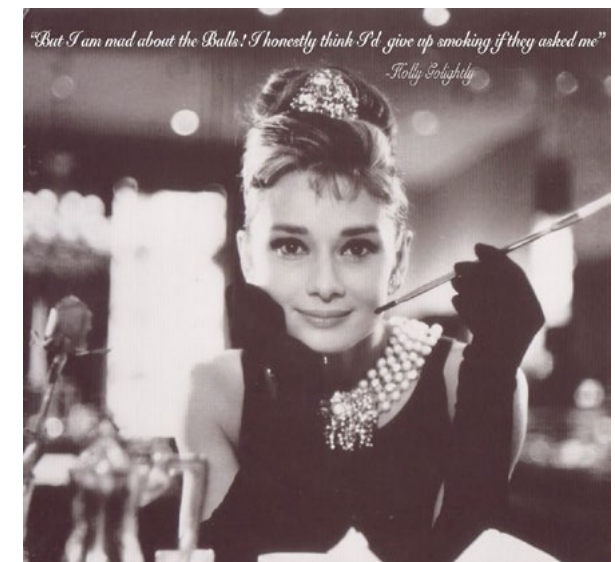
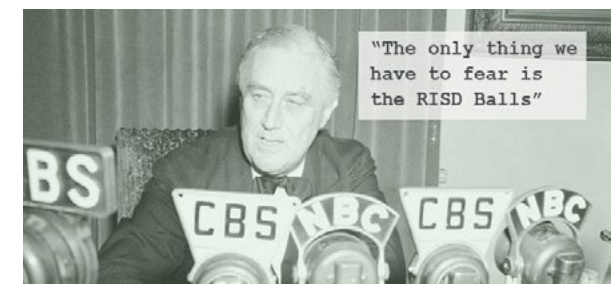
Byron would take over as head coach for the 2013–2014, and for someone as passionate and organized about the game as he is, it is no surprise that the team experienced historical success during that year. In addition to a slight update to the Balls logo, Joe Gebbia paid a visit to the Balls during the school year and shared some information about

▼► Posters for a game against MassArt and a Senior game. c. 2012–2013





▲ Photo from a game against MassArt at the Tobin Community Center. November 15, 2013



▲► Memes from the Balls Facebook page. c. 2013–2014



▲ An updated Balls logo by Ryan Bugden 14 GD, who later helped redesign RISD itself in 2022.
c. 2013–2014



▲ Joe Gebbia giving a presentation for Airbnb with the updated Balls sticker on his laptop. July 2014



◀ The victorious Balls with their inaugural NASBI trophy. February 2014

Photos of the team by Rob Chron Photography on the following spread.

the history of the team. Later, during a recorded announcement for Airbnb, a Balls sticker he was gifted to by a player can be seen on his laptop. Going into the season, the team was made up of Austin Blanks 15 BArch, Bob Han 17 ID, Connor Griffith 16 FAV, Connor Cowden 17 GD, Dexter Foster 16 BArch, Forest O'Donoghue 16 ID, Joe Fellows 16 SC, John Bai 14 ID, Luke Gordon 16 ID, Manny Hernandez 16 GD, Michael Moyal 16 ID, Oliver Xiao Song 17 ID, RaMell Ross 14 MFA PH, Rocky Hayden 17 PT, and Sira Udomritthiruj 15 FD. If you're a film buff and recognize the name RaMell Ross, that's because that's the same RaMell Ross who directed *Nickel Boys*, which was nominated for Best Picture at the 2025 Academy Awards. Small world.

The season began with a road trip victory over MassArt 51–28 followed two weeks later by a home opener at Wheeler where the Balls defeated Hampshire College 74–68. Then, on a cool night on November 22, 2013, the Balls squared off against Cooper Union yet again. However, thanks to the improved leadership of Byron Olson and help from players like RaMell Ross who played basketball at Georgetown during his undergrad, the Balls finally defeated Cooper Union 63–57. For the first time in the thirteen year history of the team, the Balls had beaten “Pooper Onion” as the student scorekeepers referred to them in the scorebooks.

Despite this strong start, the Balls dropped the next four games against the Brown Club team, Pratt, Kings College, and a rematch with Brown. Hoping to put their recent losing streak behind them, the Balls traveled to Boston on February 21, 2014 to participate in the first annual Northeast Art School Basketball Invitational (NASBI). Organized by MassArt, RISD, Cooper Union, and New School, the tournament was a way to have some semblance of a conference between all of the art school basketball teams in the New England and New York area. Hosting of the tournament would alternate each year between New York and Boston/Providence to accommodate travel, with two games being played on Saturday and the consolation and championship games played the following day. In what some may call a Cinderella run for the ages, the Balls first beat New School 68–62 and then beat Cooper Union the next day 56–52 to claim the first trophy in the history of the tournament. To this day it remains the only time RISD won the tournament, although it only lasted until around 2018, and is the only trophy on display in the Student Fitness Center.

The team celebrated their championship with another win over MassArt 59–36 on February 26 to close out the season, with an alumni game scheduled two weeks later.

The following season Byron Olson planned to defend the championship, being joined by James Lipshaw 16 and Joe Kim 16 as assistant coaches. The team for the 2014–15 school year included Manny Hernandez 16 GD, Sira Udomritthiruj 15 FD, Rocky Hayden 17 PT, Carson Cooper 15 MArch, Robert Calise 18 BArch, Luke Gordon 16 ID, Michael Moyal 16 ID, Miguel Lorenzo Gumila 15 MArch, Michael Zhang 18, Silas Cheo 17 PT, Dennis Staton 16 LArch, Shawn Guo 18, Wayne Liang 15 FD, Vaughan Lewis Carman 18, Bob Han 15 ID, Shen Guo 15 ID, Forest O'Donoghue 16 ID, Oliver Song 17 ID, and Connor Phillips 15 PT. In late November the team hosted a tailgate party in the Student Fitness Center with hotdogs to promote their game against MassArt. The Balls would go on to beat them 74–50 and hosted a tug-of-war competition at halftime between managers and staff members of the Student Fitness Center, though the winners of that competition were



Austin Blanks 15 MArch

Bob Han 17 ID

Byron Olson 12 IL,
Andrew Rogers,
Sebastian Whyte 13 MDES

Conner Griffith 16 FAV

Connor Cowden 17 GD

Dexter Foster 16 BArch

Forest O'Donoghue 16 ID

Joe Fellows 16 SC

John Bai 14 ID

Luke Gordon 16 ID

Manny Hernandez 16 GD

Michael Moyal 16 ID

Oliver Xiao Song 17 ID

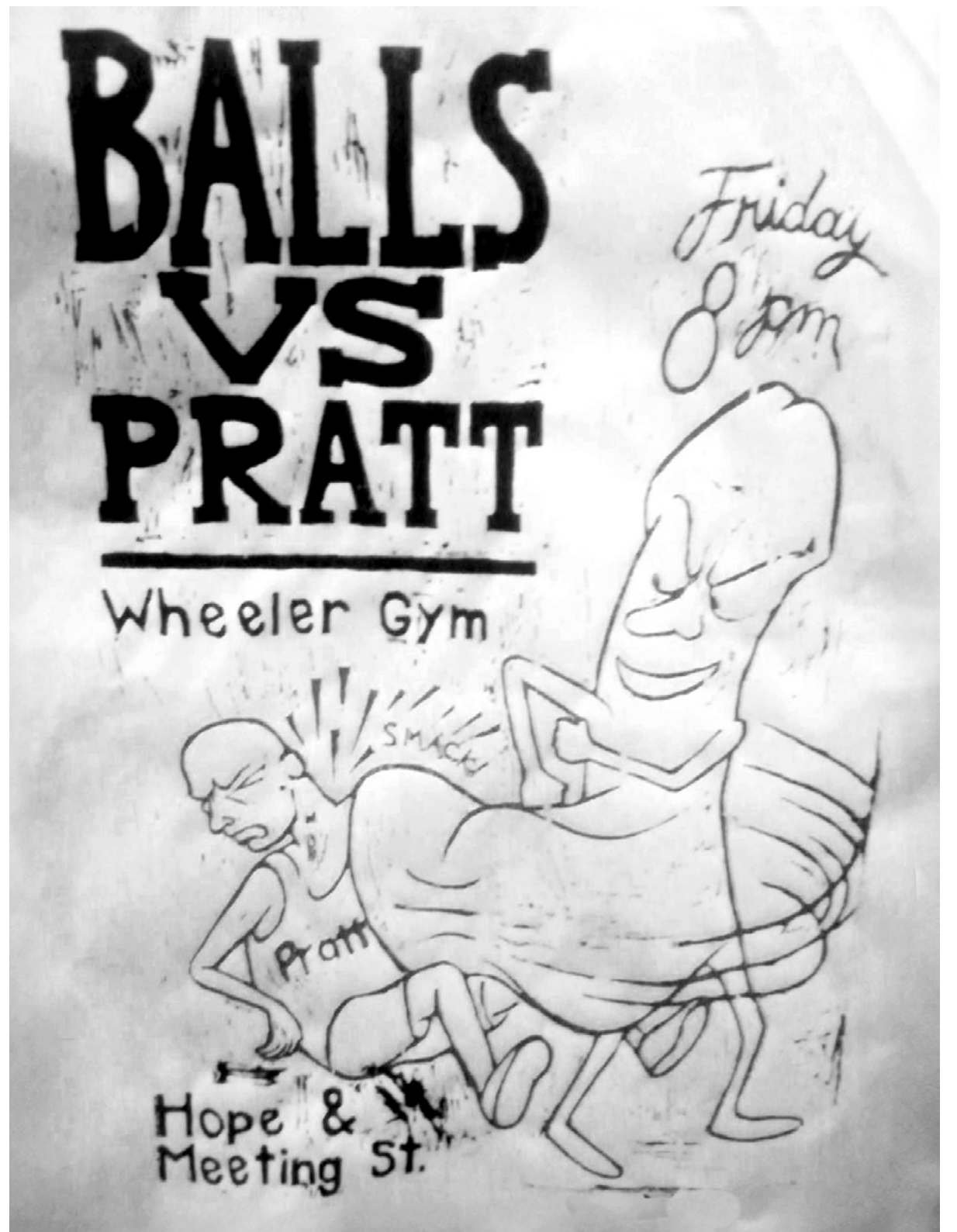
RaMell Ross 14 PH MFA

Rocky Hayden 17 PT

Sira Udomritthiruj 15 FD



▲ Behind the scenes of the Balls photoshoot with Rob Chron. February 23, 2014



▲ Linocut poster for a game against Pratt by an unknown artist. c. 2014

not recorded. On January 23, 2015 the Balls hoped to defeat Cooper Union for the third time in a row, but lost 80–64 instead. The next two games against the Brown Club team and Kings College ended in losses 68–47 and 64–44 respectively, and the team then went on to lose to Cooper Union in the first round of the NASBI, but defeated MassArt 92–46 for the consolation prize. The last game of the season was held on February 27 against MassArt at Wheeler and thankfully ended in another victory over their not as intimidating art school rival.

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS

So, after fifteen years, how do you look back on the early history of the Balls? Just by existing this long the team had become the longest continually running version of basketball at RISD, unencumbered by petty squabbles among student leadership committees or interrupted by global events (yet). The team was founded by a future billionaire who left behind the blueprint for a successful club team and through the watchful eye of passionate alumni-turned-leaders, the team blossomed into a championship caliber group, though definitions of “championship” may vary.

Through it all the students remained just as enthusiastic, cheering more for the funny name and the friends they loved than the final score sometimes, but it can’t be denied that the Balls could dominate from time to time. With only one practice a week and no NIL sponsorships to pad their pockets, the passion for the game and for the team came from the players’ own willingness to put their bodies on the line—literally (I don’t think we ever signed a waiver).

There were ups and downs, crushing defeats and a revolving door of coaches ranging from drill sergeants to maybe a little too nice, but by 2015 Byron Olson had established a program at RISD with a strong identity and clear goal: stick together.



▲▼ A selection of memes and posts from the RISD Balls Facebook page. c. 2014–2015

◀ RISD Balls hand clapper handed out at a game vs MassArt. c. 2015
▶ RISD Balls hoodie. c. 2012



2015 Schedule

Saturday, February 21

6:20pm - The New School vs. MassArt
8:50pm - RISD vs. Cooper Union

Sunday, February 22

10:20am - Consolation Game
12:50pm - Championship Game



NASBI History

The Northeast Art School Basketball Invitational was created by four of the top independent and academically rigorous art schools in the country. It marks the culmination of their basketball seasons and showcases the talents of their scholar-athletes, who are equally committed to academic and athletic achievements.

2014 - **RISD** (def. Cooper Union 56-52)

Site: Baruch College

55 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10010

Massachusetts College of Art and Design
Rhode Island School of Design
The Cooper Union
The New School

Hosted by: The New School & The Cooper Union

THE NEW SCHOOL

#	Player	Year	Pos.	Hometown
0	John Davis*	SR	G	Singapore
4	Robbie Maiuri	SR	F	New York, NY
12	Will McAuliffe	FR	F	Rye, NY
14	Tom Hilsee	JR	F	New York, NY
21	Alex Weber	JR	G	Philadelphia, PA
22	Tony Perez	JR	G	Queens, NY
24	Sam Tom	FR	F	New York, NY
35	Katie O'Donnell	SR	C	Philadelphia, PA

at-Gilman, '12
s Neuman, '11, Alex Knapp, '12
uel Paley, G '15
6
ee, WVU G '06

MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

#	Player	Year	Pos.	Hometown
0	John Davis*	SR	F	Barrington, RI
4	Robbie Maiuri	SO	F	Tewksbury, MA
12	Will McAuliffe	SO	G	Beverly, MA
14	Tom Hilsee	SR	C	Souderton, PA
21	Alex Weber	GR	G	Chicago, IL
22	Tony Perez	SO	G	Brockton, MA
24	Sam Tom	SO	G	Bucheon, So. Korea
35	Katie O'Donnell	JR	F	Torrington, CT
42	Zach Kremer*	JR	F	Sandwich, MA
54	Hali Graber	JR	G	Woodstown, NJ

Head Coach: Kevin Poole '14

THE COOPER UNION

#	Player	Year	Pos.	Hometown
1	Ronnie Kabbani	SO	G	Brooklyn, NY
2	Stephen Tang	FR	G	Bayside, NY
3	Andrey Kovalev	JR	G	Brooklyn, NY
11	Ratan Rai Sur	SR	F	New York, NY
12	Adam O'Connor Jamia	SO	F	Astoria, NY
13	Matthew Smarsch	JR	F	Staten Island, NY
21	Toby Stein	FR	F	Ottawa, Canada
24	Qing (Eli) Xu	FR	F	China
25	Andrew Tallaksen	SR	G	Staten Island, NY
31	Vlad Ciocoi*	SR	F	Brasov, Romania
33	Tom Syku	SO	G	Croton, NY
34	John (Jack) Donnellan	SO	F	Highland Mills, NY
42	Zirui (Jerry) Qiu	FR	C	China
44	Andrew Keane	SO	F	Wayne, NJ
53	Mark Perulmutter	FR	C	Astoria, NY
55	Matt Haeusgen	FR	C	Putnam, NY

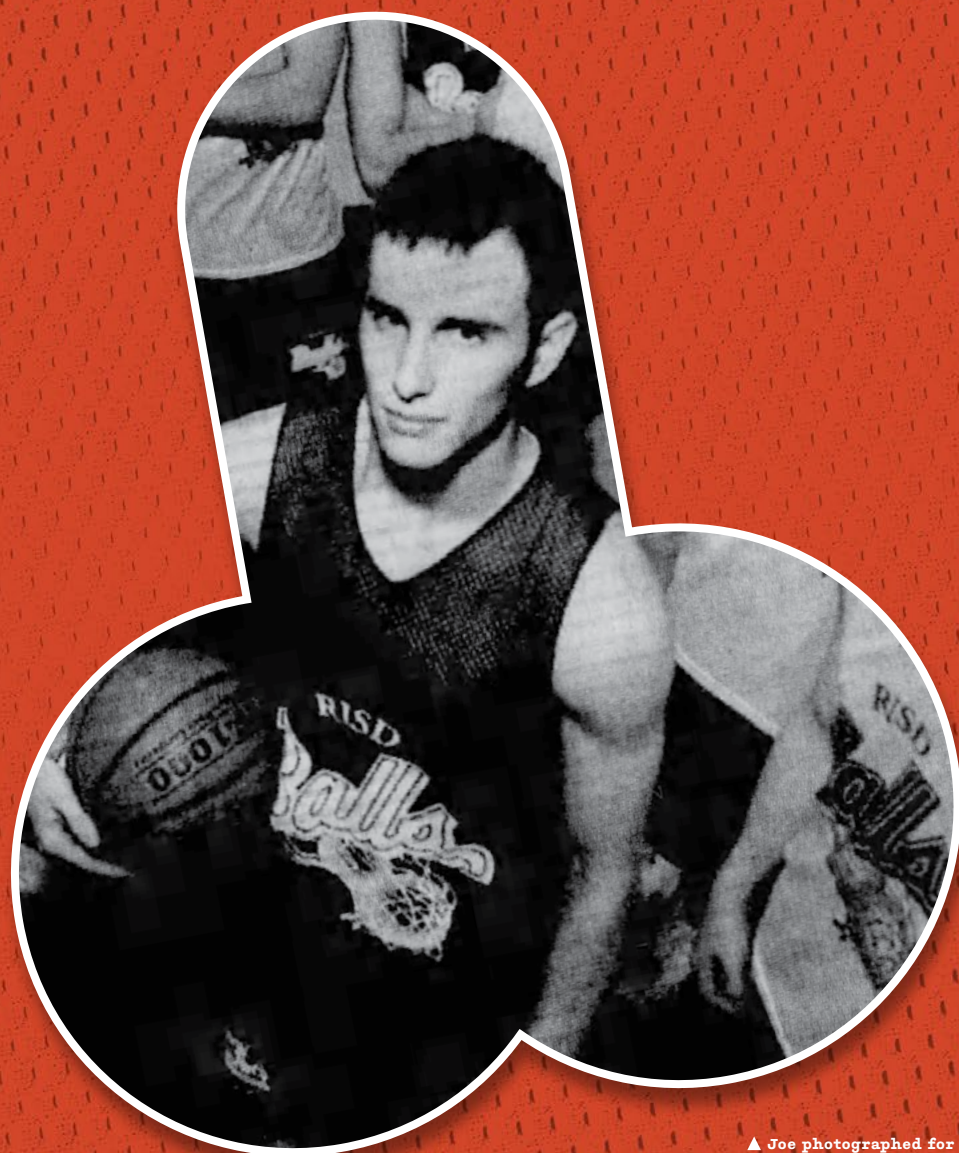
Head Coach: Rami Said '01
Assistant Coaches: Dominik Goj '13, Josh Mayourian '14
Dean of Students: Stephen Baker

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

#	Player	Year	Pos.	Hometown
0	Manny Hernandez	JR	G	Philadelphia, PA
2	Sira Udomritthiruj*	SR	G	Bangkok, Thailand
4	Rocky Hayden	SO	F	Boston, MA
5	Carson Cooper	GR	G	Sacramento, CA
10	Conner Griffith*	JR	G	Los Angeles, CA
11	Robert Calise	FR	C	Providence, RI
12	Luke Gordon	JR	G	Los Angeles, CA
13	Michael Moyal	JR	F	New York, NY
14	Miguel Lorenzo Gumila	GR	G	Manila, Philippines
15	Michael Zhang	FR	G	San Jose, CA
20	Silas Cheo	SO	G	Kensington, MD
21	Dennis Staton	GR	F	Warren, RI
22	Shawn Guo	FR	C	Vancouver, CA
24	Vaughan Lewis Carman	FR	G	Franklin Twp, NJ
25	Bob Han	SR	C	Beijing, China
30	Shen Guo	SR	F	Zhengzheng, China
33	Forest O'Donoghue*	JR	F	Boston, MA
34	Connor Phillips	SR	C	Sacramento, CA
44	Oliver Song	SO	F	East Brunswick, NJ

Head Coach: Byron Olson '12
Assistant Coaches: James Lipshaw '16, Joe Kim '16 * denotes captain

▲ The program for the second annual Northeast Art School Basketball Invitational (NASBI), February 2015



▲ Joe photographed for an article in *The Burlington Free Press*, January 30, 2002

An interview with...

Joe Gebbia 05 GD/ID

Throughout the history of basketball at RISD, there have been numerous times where a small group of students banded together to form a team. Sometimes they were able to schedule games against local colleges and have custom uniforms made. Other times, they were nothing more than glorified pickup leagues for intramural play.

The RISD Balls, founded by Joe Gebbia during late 2000 into the Wintersession period of 2001, were unlike any team that came before. As Joe himself will explain, and the many other players who were around those early years, the student initiative and organization was unmatched during this time. Almost overnight a team was formed, and within a few years they had several games a year against local colleges and other art schools, hundreds of fans present for games, and custom merchandise sold in the RISD Store. It isn't really a surprise that Joe later became as successful as he did, for what better testing ground for your business and marketing ideas is there than the Balls?

RYAN SCOTT

I've seen on your Instagram that you grew up with a love for the game of basketball. From analyzing game film, to working as a ball boy for the Atlanta Hawks for three years during high school, what drew you to the sport of basketball in the beginning? As opposed to other sports.

JOE GEBBIA

There were other sports that were competing for my attention. There was baseball and tennis. I took lessons and played in leagues, but basketball was kind of a latecomer, relatively speaking.

But it was the neighborhood sport. All my buddies played hoops and I eventually got the bug, and became obsessed.

It was such a fun sport to watch, to play, to learn, to figure out. The mechanics and ball handling. Trying to figure out all of the things that one can do with a basketball. I thought about which area I'd want to perfect as a kid.

So I got really good at no-look passes—really good—to the point where they would go off of people's faces, because they had no idea it was coming to them. But eventually people got used to it. I just had the ability to see the court in a way that would let me create these, like, insane passes to people all around me.

RISD



▲ The original Balls logo designed by Joe. c. 2001

I used to practice in my driveway every day. I used to put on this little TV, and I'd pull it into the garage on the edge of the driveway. I'd watch whatever NBA game was on that night. Sometimes the NBA Finals would be on. I remember the Bulls versus whoever.

And I'd be watching the game and practicing, and then watching the game, and then recreate the moves that I saw on TV. It was just so fun, you know. It took the right amount of athleticism and brainpower and strategy and improvisation, so it's been a part of me ever since.

RS

Fast forwarding to your college years, when you first arrived at RISD, what was the athletic culture at the school like? How did the student body and administration view club teams?

At that time it was called the Office of Student Life (OSL) in the Carr House. And this part is the origin of the team here.

I went in there. During orientation in the fall of 2000—in September. I remember walking in and there's this guy at the desk. As somebody who loves basketball, I figured that certainly there must be a team at RISD, so I asked him. I go: "Hey, I want to play on the basketball team. You know, who can I talk to, where do I go?"

And he goes: "Well... We don't have a team."

He stared at me, and there was this awkward silence for... far too long.

And he breaks the silence and says "But you can start one."

Then I said "Okay, well, what do I have to do?"

"Well, come back to me with the names of at

JG

least 12 students that want to play basketball." Alright, I can do that.

So I created some posters in my dorm room and put them up around the dorms. People could call my landline phone number at the dorms—this is before everyone had cell phones—and people would call my four-digit extension and say "Hey I saw your poster. I'm interested to learn more and play basketball."

And so about a week and a half later, I went back to the Student Life, and gave them 12 names and asked what's the next step.

"Well, you need to now go to the Student Alliance and get approved as an actual student organization."

"Okay, when's that?"

"Every Wednesday night in the Taproom."

That Wednesday night, I went to the taproom. When it comes to my time on the agenda. I say to them "My name's Joe Gebbia, I'm a freshman, and I want to start a basketball team, I've got 12 names here, and I want to be recognized as an official student organization."

Then there's some discussion about it, and they did a vote. It got approved. So, back to the guy in Carr House I went.

"It was approved. What's the next step?"

"Well, now you need to find a gym for practice."

Somehow we found a gym in Seekonk, Massachusetts. That Wintersession, I used the RISD OSL van and rounded everybody up at Carr House, and we drove to go practice.

There were no games, it was just me channeling all of the basketball camps I ever went to, game experience, and plays I've run. I think, okay, I'm gonna coach this team and we're gonna start playing basketball together.

Around this time we realized we needed a name for the team. Looking across the landscape of names for the team, there was clearly a theme at RISD. Obviously, the Nads were around. There were the Jockstraps, who were the cheerleaders to support the Nads. Scrotie had emerged for the first time during my freshman year. At one point, a field hockey team called the Shafts. There was a men's soccer team called the Sacks and a women's soccer team called the Jugs. So very naturally landed on the basketball team being the Balls.

Now, when you're creating a name, you need a brand that people can know what your concept is, and so I got to work and designed the logo with the two balls swishing through the hoop. I then found a place that could make some uniforms. They were reversible practice jerseys. It's what a real team would just practice in.

So we're just practicing that Wintersession, and we're having a good time. The Providence Journal reached out to the RISD comms team and got wind of this basketball effort, and it became a front-page story on the sports section. That was exciting. This whole time, I'm just like, "Man, how do I make this thing real? How does this become a part of the fabric of RISD?" That was always kind of my goal, like, how do you make something that would last long after I've graduated.

RS

Did the club act as a creative outlet and offer students a different kind of community or relief from their studio work?

JG

Before I got to RISD, everybody warned me that when you get here, it's so siloed. The work ethic is so crazy. People get into their majors and you never see them again. I remember thinking before I even got to campus "Wouldn't it be really cool to do something that got people out of their silos?" I don't want to end up silos and pigeonholed into just one department.

Over time, the team became this way to bring people together. Over the years as the team developed, I think it became the only place outside of graduation where you had a true cross-section of campus. You had students, obviously. Staff would come, administration would come, faculty would come, alumni would come. People from Brown would come. The president of RISD at the time, Roger Mandle, would come. Maybe we had trustees at one point as well during trustee weekends or something.

I remember one day, like, looking around, being like "Holy cow, what a cool collection of people at RISD." You saw the full diversity of this ecosystem in one place at the same time.

RS

Who did you play in the beginning? How well did the team do against more established groups?

JG

Once that first Wintersession ended, and everyone started asking if we were ever going to play any games? I knew we had to figure that out. We can't just scrimmage each other all the time. So that summer I got to thinking about how to make this more real and more official.

I remember I started to put a list together of what are all the colleges in the area that might have basketball teams? Through August and September, I started calling these coaches and athletic directors

at schools and colleges throughout New England. The experience was very interesting. When I said “Hello, yes, this is Joe Gebbia from the Rhode Island School of Design Basketball Team” one of two reactions happened.

The first: “RISD has a basketball team? You gotta be kidding me.” And they’d hang up the phone.

The other reaction was: I didn’t even get that far. They just hung up the phone. There was not a warm reception from college athletic departments to an art school basketball team.

That fall, I was in a graphic design class and my cell phone went off—in class—which was kind of unusual at the time. I step out in the hallway, whispering into the phone, and it’s the head coach of the Clark University Men’s basketball team.

He goes “Is this Joe? I got your voicemail. This is so-and-so from Clark University. We’d be happy to add you guys to our schedule this season. Let us know what dates work for you, and we can come down to Providence.

I’m like, oh my god, this is amazing! Like, shit, this is the first one. This guy actually wants to play us, I can’t believe it. I had to act all professional, and actually sound like I knew what I was talking about, and I had no clue.

Around then I also figured out a closer gym at the Wheeler School and we figured out a deal with them to rent their gym for our games. I scheduled them for December 7, 2001. It was a 7:00 pm game and our ragtag group of art school basketball players. In our mesh practice uniforms. People are coming to the game off all-nighters, covered in charcoal. It’s the antithesis of what you think a college basketball game should look like. And here comes the Clark University charter bus as it rolls up to the Wheeler School.

They’re in a suit and tie as the players come off the bus. They’re streaming into the Wheeler Gym up on that balcony area, and I’m watching them, squinting, thinking “Wait a second. I think their shortest guy is taller than our tallest guy!”

They come down onto the court, and there’s not one, but four coaches. They come across the court looking confused. They have an athletic trainer with bag full of all their gear. They have assistants and a Gatorade cooler.

I go “Coach so-and-so?”

“Yeah?”

“Hey, I’m Joe.”

“You’re Joe?” I’m also wearing a uniform.

“Yes, I’m the captain of the team, and coach.”

You could just see him looking around, thinking “What did we get ourselves into?” Clark University is, like, a serious team, by the way, Division III.

So we played the game, and it’s a blowout of epic proportions. I look at the scoreboard at the end and it’s 94 to 49, but we had, like, a hundred RISD students show up. We gave out these pom-poms with the Balls logo on it too. I just remember thinking that night “Okay, we lost the game based on the scoreboard, but this was a huge win for the team.” This is when we planted the flag that like a real organization, this is a real effort. To me, that was the beginning of the Balls. That’s when it got real. That’s like when you ship products, or ship a website. Before that, we were R&D, dabbling, and testing things out. We shipped that night on December 7th, 2001.

RS

Once you were an official team with a schedule, who did you face next? When did other art schools start getting involved and what were those relationships like?

JG

We had a few other games that season. In March, we played who would become our arch-nemesis—Cooper Union. It’s unfortunate the team doesn’t play them anymore. They’re an art, engineering, and architecture school and the ratio of males to females is very skewed male. As a result, they had, like, a lot of athletic dudes—big guys.

They were super professional. They had this coach named Dean Baker with slick-back white hair and go [imitating him] “Hey, I’m Dean Baker from Cooper Union. Hey, where’s Joe Gebbia? Hey Joe, how you doing? So happy to be here”. He was such a character.

We scrapped and hustled in that game. It was standing room only. There were so many students there. It was so loud. Students made signs, there were cheers. My favorite read “Go Balls! Beat Pooper Union!” It was this exceptional side of the student body that I don’t think anyone had ever seen before.

We lost by 6 points that game. It was the beginning of this bitter rivalry with them: art school versus art school. Every year, it was like this. We would go to New York and play them and then they would come to Providence. It was a grudge match every year. And those fuckers won every time. Until finally the team captain in, like, 2012 texted me “Joe, you’re never gonna believe this, we just beat Cooper Union!” Finally!

The other backstory there is, when I applied to art schools, I applied to four schools.

Cooper Union was the only one I didn’t get into. It was a super vendetta.



RS

Now that you had practices, jerseys, games, and merch, what else assured you that the team was here to stay?

JG

I’ll never forget. The student handbook that came out the next year for the incoming freshman class that lists all the things and activities and clubs and everything. It was the first time that the RISD Balls were in print as a part of the school. And I remember seeing that and feeling so proud of it.

I tore that page out, and I wrote a note to myself and signed it, and it’s now framed in my office. It was a real-life moment for me knowing that I can make ideas happen. It’s entirely possible to start from nothing and will an idea into existence. I think of the team fondly as one of my first startups.

I had to recruit people. I had to raise money. I had to run an operation and assemble a schedule. I had to market and learn how to create a brand, how to sell, and how to convince students to come to a game on a Friday night—that’s no easy task! There were all of these quirky elements that I didn’t know I’d have to deal with later in life in a much larger context. But it was a perfect test ground for that, to make mistakes and figure out how to convince people to do stuff for you, and run something.

RS

Back to the original name, I’ve spoken to some people, people who don’t like the whole, phallic imagery of RISD sports mascots. I know the current administration has some things to say about Scrotie, but from your perspective, how do you view the importance of the basketball team’s name? What does the name mean to you?

▲ Joe photographed for an issue of *Blend*. c. spring 2003



***It's entirely possible to start
from nothing and will an idea
into existence. I think of the team
as one of my first startups.***

***– Joe Gebbia
05 GD/ID***



JG

It's a symbol of pride. It was a symbol of being unconventional. It was the opposite of a state school. The Cooper Union was the Cooper Union Eagles. Yawn. How boring. Their mascot is an eagle? Super creative, guys. So, for me, it was a mark of self-expression, which is what every art school should embrace.

I think it's a travesty and a sign of great concern that the school would be offended by the name of a basketball team, or a hockey team, or another sports team on campus. I think the fact that the RISD Store pulled the Balls merchandise is a terrible warning sign of not standing up—RISD not standing up for what it should be standing up for, which is freedom of expression. It concerns me that the school is worried about offending people. So much that it would restrict the use of those names or images. That's not what art is about. RISD needs to be a defender of expression—especially for its students.

RS

On a related note, the recent rebrand of RISD drew criticism from the student body, believing that one unifying color and typeface removed a lot of the previous personality from the school. How do you see groups like the Balls kind of coexisting within this new identity? From a designer's perspective, is it a rebellion against conventional brand guidelines as a whole?

JG

Look, I was a part of that project when I was a trustee along with Michael Rock from 2x4. I think it was time for some house cleaning on the brand front, it was pretty gnarly. It had been decades, and things were all over the place. The RISD seal was being used in all kinds of ways that would make the original designer, [John Howard Benson], turn in his grave.

It was time to catch up and set some standards and guidelines, and make it 2025. My guess is that as the years and decades go on it will start to be co-opted and utilized in ways it was never intended to. And then thirty years from now, there'll be some other group that comes along and goes "We should clean up the brand!" and do this all over again.

But, I never thought of the basketball team as having to adhere to that. I don't think any sports teams should adhere to those brand standards.

RS

Considering basketball teams at RISD have existed off and on for several decades now, what does the

future of basketball and sports at RISD in general look like to you? I've heard of your Balls manifesto you wrote, could you tell me more about that?

JG

It was called the Balls Initiative, and it was the document I left behind for captains to hand down to each other over time. There was some semblance of a playbook. Obviously, it would change, but it was meant to at least be something so that when the next guy walked into the Office of Student Life, there'd be something for them to at least pick up. That's why I flooded the archives with everything. There should be a copy of everything that I created, every piece of merchandise or printouts. I always made an extra copy for the archive, so that whenever there was the next guy in the future that would want to carry the team on, or maybe the team went away and they wanted to restart it again, there'd be a treasure trove of history for them. They don't have to completely start from scratch.

Now, luckily, it's 2025. So the team's been going since 2000. If you go for 25 years, that's pretty cool. The dream actually happened. Which was the creation of the team, get into the fabric of the institution, and do everything I can for it to propagate and perpetuate long after my graduation. And the Balls still keep in touch and play together. We have an email list of the Ballumni who can reach out to each other for professional connections, or to play in the Alumni game on campus.

While I was still at RISD, the Office of Student Life became my headquarters. I'd be in there every day. I commandeered a desk right in that corner office, that cool curved window. Eventually, I convinced the Office of Student Life to create a work-study program for an athletic coordinator. We hired somebody, and that person, [Dan Frietas IL 05], became the person coordinating, doing the scheduling, getting the sound equipment to the gym for the games, coordinating who's gonna do the halftime show, and all that stuff. Only recently, and I should have done this sooner, I endowed that role. That role is now an official staff member of the school, it's not work-study anymore. It's like a real role, endowed forever, because the sports coordinator is a key part of a captain coming in and saying "Okay, I want to run the team" and now I've got a right hand man to help me do it. I think that's a very important puzzle piece for how the team will continue long after I'm gone.

RS

One final question. What advice would you give to students wanting to start something as

unconventional or seemingly impossible as founding a basketball team at a place like RISD?

JG

There's no reason not to. The purpose of going to college is that you get a place to try things out with very little consequence. Right? Like, you can do things, and if they don't work, it's okay, you're on a college campus. It's designed for experimentation, for discovering yourself, for exploring what you're capable of—trying new things.

My advice for somebody with an inclination to start something would be that the best ideas I've had in my life, whether it's a business or something else, have been from solving my own problem. The Balls are a quintessential example of something that was just solving my problem. I wanted to play basketball, I wanted to do it while I was at RISD. I solved my own problem and it happened to solve other people's problems too.

If you get stuck, just figure out what the next step is. The Balls are just taking it to the next step. It's a sequence of, okay, 12 names? Cool, come back. What's the next step? Student alliance? Cool, I did that, what's the next step? It's just that dozens of times. Airbnb is like that, but 5,000 times. It's that skill of having an idea for something and instead of being overwhelmed thinking "holy shit, how am I gonna do this?" It's just like "Well, what's the tiniest next step that I could take?" Go take it.



► An early Balls jersey signed by players on the team. c. 2003



▲ Amanda at the first Balls
Alumni Game. October 10, 2003

An interview with...

Amanda Penecale 06 IL

Often when I hear critiques of the RISD Balls, the most common dismissal of the team boils down to the idea that we are nothing more than a toxic ‘boys club’ like any other collegiate basketball team. I’m hoping, dear reader, that you have a much more open mind and have realized the bigger picture here, but if you still aren’t convinced, then it may shock you to learn that the Balls have always had female players?

Amanda Penecale wasn’t the first, and she certainly was not the last, but she may have been one of the most experienced and skilled in the team’s history. Granted, women’s and men’s rules don’t always translate well, and the basketballs they use are different sizes, but for someone attending art school that still had a passion for the game, the Balls were the welcoming environment to retain that part of your identity. The 2025–26 team, although a larger roster overall, contains a record-breaking five female players. So though the team name may suggest otherwise, everyone at RISD has Balls.

RYAN SCOTT

Could you tell me a little bit about your history with basketball before you came to RISD. Did you play in high school or anything like that?

AMANDA PENECALE

Yeah. I played in high school on a pretty competitive program at a Catholic school called Mount Saint Joseph’s outside of Flourtown near Philadelphia. We went to the states all four years I was there. During my freshman year I was a JV player who swung varsity. Then I played varsity the next three years. I was a captain during my senior year and a lot of the girls that I played with were getting recruited to big name places like UConn and Princeton to play basketball. I was recruited by Brown actually, along with a couple other places in New England.

RISD was always my first choice. I wanted to go to school for art, and when I got in, the only downside I saw was that I couldn’t play basketball. While I was learning the ropes over the course of my freshman year, getting myself sorted, I didn’t even know there was a basketball team at RISD. During that time I did play pickup at Brown and met some people who told me “why don’t you play for the RISD team if you’re a RISD lady?” And I had no idea what they were talking about. I went to Nads games since they were a part of the culture and a thing I did

with my friends as a freshman, but I didn't try out for the Balls until my sophomore year.

So I grew up playing pretty serious basketball, playing on travel AAU teams like that, and I thought I was going to play in college. But then when the dream of getting into RISD happened, I realized I had to focus on my art, but then once I found out that there was still an avenue for me to enjoy being a part of some version of collegiate basketball, I said "let's go".

I remember calling my friends back home and telling them I was gonna try out for this team, but they were like "they're called the Balls, though?" I grew up going to coed basketball camps as well as Sixers basketball camps in high school, so I didn't really think much into the name. I just wanted to have some fun.

RS

Was there any merch in the store during your time?

AP

Definitely by my senior year. I remember my brother came up to visit once and he got a t shirt with the logo on it. I also had a Balls bumper sticker on my little Volvo at the time, which I thought was pretty hilarious. My brother wore that shirt to high school once and got in trouble for it too. [Laughs]

RS

Once you made the team and started practicing, what was their dynamic like at the time? I know you're somebody who was on the team while Joe Gebbia was still at RISD. What do you remember about him as both a teammate and a leader along with the players on the Balls?

AP

He was always a dynamic character with classic "captain energy". He wore a Nike sweatband around his forehead and a go-getter attitude. I remember Cameron Davis and John Dawson too, they were the characters that always stood out in my mind. John had red hair and was this large-and-in-charge center or power forward guy. Him and Cameron were just the guys that would pass the ball to me, if that makes sense. I was "the girl" if you will.

Sometimes in practice someone would just say "I got the girl" when we were picking teams. Eventually you just become a part of the mechanism. I wasn't by any means a star of the team. As a female player I was built smaller than the other guys and in high school I played center and power forward, but on the Balls I played small forward

position and just crashed the boards. I would say I'm more like a Dennis Rodman kind of character when I play.

I don't recall much in the way of plays, since it felt like a step above street ball in my memory.

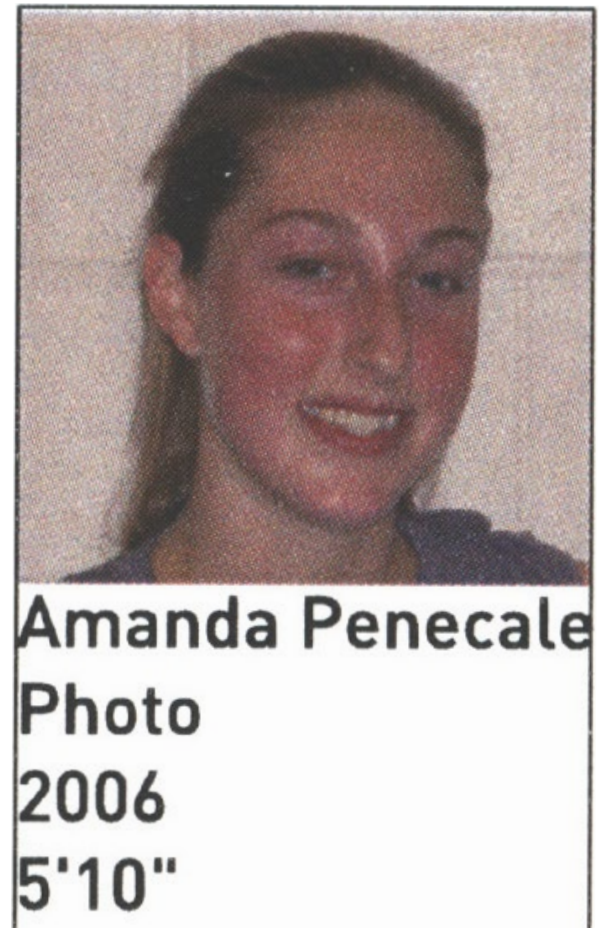
RS

Well I figured I'd let you know that we actually had two women on the team last season, so the team is still very much coed and emphasizes its acceptance of anyone who's willing to try out.

AP

That's great, and I would hope that with the resurgence of the WNBA now, that more will come out to play. I've been loving watching girls playing the game. Caitlin Clark has done a lot for the sport, and it's been fun to see basketball really coming up in the female sports realm.

I do remember playing our rival Cooper Union once and going into it I remember how a lot of people on their team were obsessed with the sport and wore face paint and stuff like that. They had two girls on their team too with aggressive French braids that were painted and three-colored socks.



▲ Amanda's photo in the first Balls Alumni Game program. October 10, 2003

RS

Did you continue to play basketball after you graduated from RISD?

AP

I'm currently a high school art teacher. I teach photography, drawing, painting, and also some middle school classes. I also coach basketball, I'm going to say I started coaching around when I was a teen. Before coming to RISD, I coached a bunch of summer camps. After I graduated I started teaching in Nantucket, and I didn't do basketball there for two years. But then after that, almost every other role I've been in I've also been a coach.

I've coached high school teams with not a great record, middle school teams that won their league years in a row—I got to cut down a net with them—and coached high school again at a boarding school. At the school where I currently teach I've coached middle school for three years, and then the last two years I haven't coached, so I was sort of taking a break to have some nights free. It becomes pretty intense.

RS

What are your thoughts on the name of the team itself and how did that mentality affect your approach to the game? How has playing basketball at RISD stuck with you after graduating?

AP

It was nice to see people with all different sorts of backgrounds playing the game there. When my serious basketball friends and teammates from high school would question why I was at an art school, I'd say that I was going to be an artist, but that didn't mean I couldn't be an athlete. It's an important thing for people choosing their path that it doesn't have to be one thing or the other.

The name of the team definitely added another factor. You have to have a good sense of humor, especially as a player, to be a part of something that's sort of making a joke about the game.

This past fall I was hanging out with some friends, and somebody said "Oh, shit, you went to RISD? Do you know Joe Gebbia?" because this friend and I like to talk about basketball and he knew of the Balls, and I said "Shit, I was on that team." He asked "Why? Why did you play on that team?" I said "Why not?" I hadn't really thought too much about the RISD Balls recently, but I guess people still find that kind of stuff good for conversation over drinks.





***I wanted to go to school for art,
and when I got in, the only
downside I saw was that I
couldn't play basketball.***

***– Amanda Penecale
06 IL***





▲ Anthony photographed for *The Burlington Free Press*.
January 30, 2002

An interview with...

Anthony Petrie 04 GD

Along with Joe Gebbia, Anthony Petrie helped found the Balls during the 2000–2001 school year. Though Joe left behind clear instructions on how to keep the team alive, other students like Anthony were the players who helped promote games, reach out to sponsors, and convince their friends and community to give this new basketball team a watch on the weekends.

As I communicated with Anthony over email and eventually organized an interview with him, he also sent over photos of the original Balls jersey, which he still cherishes. Additionally, he emailed me the original Adobe Illustrator file for the Balls logo. When I first received that, it felt like finding the Holy Grail. Some of the pen tool usage was questionable and it wasn't the cleanest file, but having access to the exact file printed on jerseys, t-shirts, and so much more was yet another highly rewarding milestone of this journey.

RYAN SCOTT

What was your experience with basketball before coming to RISD? Did you play in high school or on any club teams?

ANTHONY PETRIE

I never played on any organized team. I'm from New York, and we played a lot of pickup games at the park, and that's kind all there was for me. I'm a short white guy from the suburbs, so basketball is not something that comes naturally to me by any means or anything that I can possibly excel in. I just enjoyed playing, and that was it.

And so when we get to RISD during our freshman year, there's always a lack of or small amount of people who are more athletically inclined at an art school, and they tend to stick together.

RS

When did you first meet Joe Gebbia, and when did you start putting this team together as a group?

AP

Joe and I were in the same year and in the same freshman classes. We were going over to Brown's gym and playing pick up games there on the weekends, and then that turned into having more people come with us and play. After we found out that you

could rent a van from Public Safety, we started driving over to Seekonk, Massachusetts on Saturdays to play at the Wheeler Field House.

Joe eventually had this entrepreneurial spirit that he's always had to try to make something bigger than it was, and wanted to get this thing more organized. He did a lot of the same stuff that you did in terms of researching the history of basketball and sports at RISD, and wanted to continue that in his own way.

Then once we started playing real games in 2001-2002, we were playing a bunch of Division III teams who would absolutely fucking annihilate us. There were only, like, seven or eight players on our team. It wasn't until the following year that Joe found this guy, Steve Bailey, who came in and started coaching. I can't really remember too much about him to be honest. We used to have meetings in the Tap Room — Joe, Steve, and I — but I don't remember what the hell we were talking about, because Joe kind of did everything, I helped out a little in the background, and Steve didn't really do much.

RS

How was the team promoted to potential players and student fans at that time?

AP

I'm sure we did posters and stuff, but it was mostly word of mouth. When we first started, we were still living in the dorms, so you know how word travels around there. But like I said, when people are interested in sports and working out in an environment like RISD, you tend to gravitate towards each other, and then those people will bring their inner circle to come see games. It's not like we had a million people at games, it was a small crowd. We would just call upon our friends to be like "Hey, can you emcee this?" Or we'd reach out to someone who was in a band or break dancing group to come do a halftime show, and then we'd ask the Office of Student Life for money to put that on.

But honestly, the people in the audience were just our close friends. Early on it was just us traveling to other colleges to play, and I think those games for them as scrimmages, but they still counted towards their overall record, so that's why they'd try to completely annihilate us. Word eventually got around to the students at the other colleges we were playing that they were playing art schools, and were called the Balls, and they would come to heckle us, mostly because we had the Johnny Rockets on the back of our jerseys. It was ridiculous. It was just so, so embarrassing.



▲ Anthony during a game against Mass Bay Community College. October 28, 2002

RS

Speaking of Johnny Rockets, could you tell me how they came to sponsor that early team?

AP

When Joe first got this idea to put together a team, he obviously wanted jerseys. He designed that logo and then talked to the guy that managed the Johnny Rockets on Thayer Street, when there still was one there. We walked up there, he had put together some boards of jersey mock ups, and we presented it. We pretty much just needed the money to print jerseys, and we told them we're going to be a billboard for you. The manager cut us a check for \$250, and then we got another \$250 from the Office of Student Life, and the jerseys were printed.

People would make fun of us because they didn't have our names on them, it just said "Johnny Rockets" on the back. The shorts were literally just black Johnny Rockets shorts. The other colleges we played weren't used to seeing that because they were being funded by their school. After that year, once we had a full season and the team started getting media exposure and coming to represent RISD more, they started taking us a little more seriously. Especially since the Nads were such a big thing at that time, and they had all of their own stuff. I think they felt bad for us.

RS

Do you remember the teams you played and how those games would go?

AP

I can't remember who it was, but there was a game that we were playing and we were up by ten points going into the second half and the only reason why was because the other team had pulled all of their starters for the entire game. They just had their third stringers out there. But then, because the wins and losses were going to count against their record, I

think the other team was like "Okay, we can't lose this game". So they literally had their starters go out at halftime and put their jerseys on, because they didn't even dress for the game. Then they came for the second half and wiped the floor with us. That was really our only close game when I was playing in that first year. It wasn't until the following year, 2002-2003, that we started to play against schools like Cooper Union and Pratt.

RS

How did the RISD administration react to the team at the time? I know Roger Mandle and Don Morton supported you early on, but did anyone ever have issues with the Balls?

AP

Everyone got a kick out of it. They were always going to be supportive of student endeavors, especially the Office of Student Life. We had a photoshoot with Roger in that Balls jersey because we used those as the posters to advertise games and stuff, which I can't imagine Robert was super pleased about, but we did it anyway. The school is so small, and everyone's just trying to support each other, I don't think we really had any opposition.

RS

What was the story of Scrotie and Bob St. Aubin? Nowadays the mascot has come to be more of a Nads icon, but did he ever come to Balls games?

AP

Bob was a wild dude. As far as I was aware he was the one that created Scrotie in 2000 for Nads games. He worked with the studio Big Nazo in downtown Providence to make the big Scrotie costume, and he started wearing it to Nads games. I don't know whatever ended up happening to Bob. I haven't seen him since college. He was a pretty wild dude, and would go completely nuts at these games, mostly fueled by alcohol, and he would be pretty lewd. The parents during Parents Weekend fucking loved Scroite because it was the wildest shit they've ever seen.

We had Bob come to Balls games too early on, because anyone that was going to those things was really just our friends who would show up to

▲ Bob St. Aubin 04 ID in the original Scrotie costume. c. 2001

help support. We obviously wanted Scroite there to really throw off the other team and make it as uncomfortable and bizarre of an atmosphere as humanly possible for them.

RS

What do you remember about the team getting an article written about them in the Burlington Free Press in 2002?

AP

I vaguely remember that. That photo was in the field house where we first practiced. I was so confused by the whole thing, because it was so early on and it still just pickup games really. I had some stupid quote in there about meeting people, I don't even know where that came from. I was just there to play basketball. I'm sure Joe loved it, because he loved that kind of shit.

RS

Was the school or team selling merch during your time?

AP

No, we didn't have shit. We would make all of our own stuff. I think I got the long socks that said "Balls" on them, the knee high socks. Then we had headbands the following year. It wasn't until my ten year graduation reunion that I finally got a Balls shirt from the store, and that was the only thing I had like that.

RS

How do you look back on that time in your life? What did the Balls team mean to you?

AP

It probably felt a lot different back then than it feels for you now. For you, it's an organized thing that's been around for a while, and you've got so much history to build on from that. But for me at the time, it was such a secondary thing. Later on it turned into this bigger thing, but much later, after me. It didn't have much of an identity yet for me to have too much investment in it. But, I kept my jersey all this year, all these years. I might be the only one that still has that stupid original Johnny Rockets jersey, so there's some sentimental value there.





***The school is so small, everyone's
just trying to support each
other, I don't think we really
had any opposition.***

***– Anthony Petrie
04 GD***





▲ Bill in a huddle during a game against Cooper Union. February 26, 2010

An interview with...

Coach Bill Miller 91 PT

The coach of the RISD Balls is often overlooked. When you think of the Balls, you think of the wild posters, the crazy fans, and the irreverent players, but how often do you think about the man trying to keep everything together? Steven Bailey was the first coach, after that a Coach Stein came to lead the team, but was not well liked and referred to by former players as “Coach Stain”. However, by the 2007-08 season, Bill Miller took over. As a painting technician on campus, Bill knew the students well and is still a devoted supporter of the team today, as he often brings up his time with the team or recommends new students to try out whenever he overhears a painting student discussing basketball. He may not have been Phil Jackson, but wins don’t keep the Balls going, its support where it’s needed.

RYAN SCOTT

So, could you tell me a little about how you found yourself as the coach of the RISD Balls and your history with the game of basketball?

BILL MILLER

When I was younger, I played basketball in high school and football and was on the golf team. Later on, after graduating from RISD in the Painting department in 1991, I became a RISD employee.

I was a tech in the Painting department, and one day, Joe Gebbia came to visit. He was a senior at the time, and he had heard that I was interested in basketball, so he asked me to coach. So that next year, after Joe graduated, I became the coach.

We had a lot of fun that first year but the crowds were small. The second year, I talked to Don Morton, the director of the Office of Student Life, and told him that I think we’re the only college basketball program in the country without a shoe deal. So we reached out to Converse, and as you can imagine, the head of their shoe design division was a RISD alum. We went up to Boston and met with them, and we came back with two pairs of shoes, uniforms, warm ups, gym bags, and a whole bunch of other stuff.

We played Pratt, Cooper Union, and Sarah Lawrence. I remember going out to the Cape and

playing Cape Cod Community College. We got smoked out there.

Like I said, we had good crowds during my second year, and that was because I instituted what I called the “15-20” rule. At the time there were 15 students on the team, and I told them during practices that they were responsible for getting 20 people each into the stands for games. All of a sudden, we’re playing in front of four or five-hundred people over at the Wheeler Gym.

RS

Wow! When I looked through old photos that was really something that jumped out at me; just how big the crowds were at that time. I always wondered how that came to be.

BM

Yeah, what I’ve learned from my time with the team is that any kind of endeavor contributes to the RISD experience. The institution gives a lot of attention to interdisciplinary activity, but the reality is that we’re so driven by the curriculum and the disciplines that it makes it difficult to have that true experience.

Even though this is not what you would call “traditional curriculum”, here’s a bunch of students from all different areas of the institution hanging out, having a few laughs, blowing off some steam, getting to know each other, and maybe facilitating conversations and studio visits. It’s great. In the thirty years that I’ve been involved with the school, that was the most interdisciplinary experience that I ever had.

And the structure was really laid out by Joe, who was the architect of everything with the team and put the mechanisms in place for me to benefit from it in the future. As a coach, I asked the students what they wanted to do. I told them that I’d be their coach with only one consideration: that no matter what’s happening, every student on the team gets equal minutes on the floor. If you can accept that, then I’ll be the coach.

As an athlete I think you’ll understand this, it’s very much like what happens in the studio. You get to fail a lot. You put in a lot of reps and you try to pursue excellence. But it takes patience, and it takes practice. It’s interesting that we use the word “practice” in art to refer to some heightened activity in a studio, but I always think about it as someone shooting a hundred foul shots a day — it’s just reps. We have this expression in the Painting department: “The harder you work, the luckier you get”. You have to make a lot of paintings to make a few good ones.

There’s also the component part of creativity, which I talk about in my color class, and that is the



◀ Bill on the sideline during a game against Pratt. February 5, 2010

transcendence that athletes feel, that can happen in creative practice, when there are those days on the court where no matter what you do, the ball goes in the hoop. You get to have one of those “Steph Curry” moments and it’s transcendent. I’ve had those experiences in basketball. I’ve had them in golf, when people talk about striking the ball and it feels like you’re holding a tuning fork in your hand. You know all that’s good. The jocks call it “being in the zone”, but you can have those moments in the studio too.

RS

What do you remember about those early practices with the team, getting to know the players and understanding how coaching a team made up of art students is different from your typical collegiate basketball team?

BM

In terms of strategy, here was my advice: if you had the ball and you thought you could get it to the rim from where you are, shoot it. And for everybody else? Assume that it’s not going in, and try to get it so you can shoot it again.

The other strategy I had was “platoon substitution”. You can assume that most club basketball teams are incredibly out of shape, so if you can use fatigue and energy as a strategy, it’ll help you. I think that’s why we ended up winning a couple of games, because we didn’t run out at the end.

Here’s a story I think you’d like. Once when we were in New York for our Cooper Union and Pratt runs. We’d take the charter bus down and stay in a flea bag motel right in Midtown that was surprisingly affordable. So we played Cooper Union on a Saturday afternoon and got smoked. Then on Sunday morning, we’re in a huddle right before the game, and the captain of the Balls team tried to motivate the other players. He told them: “Let’s go remind these guys why they’re the safety school!”

RS

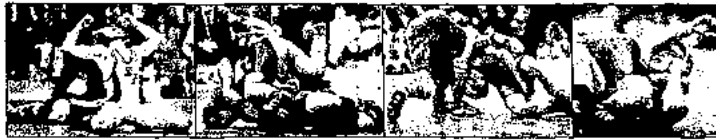
What do you remember about the other teams?

BM

We played MassArt, Pratt, and Sarah Lawrence. You could see there were both experienced, former high school athletes and those that were out there for a few laughs that made up a team just like ours.

The two teams that stood out were Cape Cod Community College, who was like a run and gun team. They had a lot of fun when they played us, and they never tapped on the brakes. As a result I think the final score was around a hundred-something

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The Providence
 Sunday Journal

WINTER OLYMPICS | MEN'S HOCKEY FINAL

Victory vaults Wilson to hockey icon

A Team USA win Sunday over Canada would put the R.I. native in elite company

By MARK DIVER
 ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

Win or lose on Sunday afternoon in Vancouver, U.S. Olympic coach Ron Wilson already belongs to an exclusive club of American coaches who have won at the highest level of professional and international hockey.

The only other members of the club are Herb Brooks and Bob Johnson.

This much is not debatable: Brooks is the greatest American hockey coach ever.

A victory by Wilson's underdog Americans over the mighty Canadians in the gold medal game, no matter how glorious, will not budge Brooks from his pedestal. The 1980 gold medal at Lake Placid, masterminded by Brooks and memorialized in the movie "Miracle," was an iconic moment, not just in hockey history but in sports history. It never will be equalled.

Brooks, who died in 2003, won three NCAA titles at the University of Minnesota and

More Olympic coverage
 on Pages C6-7

was an NHL coach with the New York Rangers, Minnesota, New Jersey and Pittsburgh. Because of Lake Placid, it doesn't matter that he never won a Stanley Cup.

Brooks is No. 1. End of discussion.

But the No. 2 slot — currently held by Johnson — will be up for grabs if Wilson's team wins gold.

Johnson, who died in 1991, made his name at the University of Wisconsin, where he won three NCAA championships and built one of the marquee programs in college hockey.

Johnson also was a superb NHL coach.

Under Johnson, the mid-1980s Calgary Flames were a very good team but could never win a Stanley Cup. Johnson guided the

SEE WILSON, C6



Ron Wilson sports

REYNOLDS

Continued from C1

It's all fun and games

family business after all, he wanted to be an artist. But his love of the game persisted, and that's what he brings to the Balls.

"It's about the purity of it," he says. "It's like the classroom. Make it pure."

There is no admission charge, and by the time the game against Pratt starts, the small gym of the Wheeler School on the East Side is packed, not an open seat to be had. The bleachers are full of students, three females are doing some kind of overstated cheerleading rendition. More kids are sitting on the floor.

The only problem is the other team hasn't arrived yet.

No worry.

"This is RISD time," says Don Morton, the school's director of student life, who also serves as the school's athletic director, even though he says the school had a flag football team for a year before he even knew there was a team.

RISD time?

What's RISD time?

"Always after it's supposed to be," Morton says.

Last year, Pratt called at game time to say they had just crossed the Rhode Island border in their ride from New York. No matter. The 400 kids who were there simply improvised, had shooting contests, and drop-kicking contests, and waited for Pratt to show up.

RISD time.

The players come out in maroon uniforms that says "Balls" on the front, one kid wearing a red and white knit cap and running around pumping up the crowd. Some loud undecipherable music is playing. And the crowd is pumped up, no question about it.

"Now it's time to meet your RISD Balls," says the P.A. announcer.

It's a catchy nickname, for sure. Not as catchy as the hockey team's, which is Nads, the obvious chant being "Go Nads," but then there's a shelf life on creativity, even at RISD.

Consider the flag football team, simply called RISD Football.

Or as someone said, "They figured that RISD Football was ironic enough."

Indeed.

The game is surprisingly good. Everyone on both teams played high school basketball, and they all bring their competitiveness to it. All play because they want to, not because they're on scholarship, not because they're trying to play professionally afterward, not because basketball helped get them into school, not because they expect the game to take them somewhere, but for the simple joy of it.

"I will miss it next year for sure," says Liam Van Fleet, a senior from upstate New York. "It's been great."

You talk to the kids who play, and that's what comes through, this love of the game, this break from the demand of the studios and a high-pressure art school. It is what college sports probably once upon a time were intended to be, before they turned into the business they too often are, with coaches under pressure, discontented fans, all the things we've come to associate with college basketball.

This is the flip side.

This is the teams spending halftime in the gym because there are no locker rooms.

It's the dinosaur who runs by, followed by another kid who is filming him, as if it all performance art, the kids in the bleachers, the two teams, the game itself.

For isn't that what basketball is, any game is, a kind of art?

Miller certainly thinks so, art lined with a little irony, which is why the two out-of-bounds plays are called "Monet and Picasso."

And as the game comes down the stretch, the students screaming, both teams as intense as tennis anywhere, the dinosaur running up and down the sidelines, it's all a great show. And when the Balls win, 60-57, the students storm the court as if they had just won the national title.

And the best thing?

The very best thing?

"We party, win, lose or draw," Miller says. Thank Jim Bayon and Keno Davis for that?

Long article on page C1 / 277-7340

Mostly fun and games

RISD's basketball team and its league are a far cry from the Big East or A-10



Bill Reynolds

PROVIDENCE — Where to start?

Is it with the other team arriving by van 45 minutes late and changing in the corner of the gym?

Is it with the fact they practice only once a week and play only eight games?

Is the fact that the players are introduced by what they are majoring in?

Is it that one of the players sits in the stands before the game while a female student rubs his shoulders?

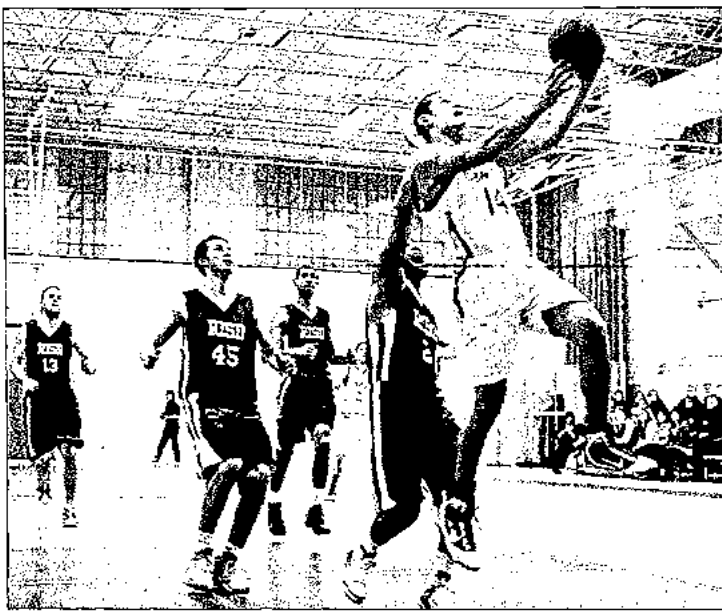
Or is it the kid dressed in a dinosaur headset, which he made in "Creature Creation" class, periodically standing behind the basket when the other team is shooting a foul shot waving his arms?

Where to start?

Because we all know about college basketball in The Dunk and at the Ryan Center, with their fat-cat donors and their choreographed dance teams, their excess and high-salaried coaches in expensive suits, the sense of bigness that seems to hover over everything like fog over a coastal resort.

This is the flip side.

This is basketball at the Rhode Island School of De-



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BOB BREIDENBACH

sign, the RISD Balls if you will, and any resemblance to what we've come to associate with college basketball is strictly coincidental.

Take the coach, for example.

His name is Bill Miller, he runs the school's point-

ing studio, and how did he become the coach of the RISD Balls? Was it a national search? Was it an extensive interview search? Had he been the assistant for years, paying his dues, waiting for years? How?

"The students knocked on my door," he says.



When you attend a RISD Balls game you will certainly see basketball being played, but sometimes it's interesting to watch people in crazy costumes leading funny chants, and fans throwing their full support behind their favorite players. Above, Cooper Union's Alex Nagornik cruises in for a layup Friday night.

SEE REYNOLDS, C4



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BOB BREIDENBACH

◀ The article by Bill Reynolds on the RISD Balls in *The Providence Journal*, February 28, 2010

to thirty-something.

The other team that stood out was Cooper Union. They had a lot of high school athletes, a well-funded program, frequent practices, and they played a complete schedule of about seventeen to eighteen games a season. They were more evolved than us. I went 0-6 against them, which I'm saddened to tell you, because they were my white whale. I didn't like their coach, Dean Baker. He was a smug, patronizing character. As a result I wanted to just mop the floor with them.

RS

Did you ever interact with coaches from other art schools and non art schools?

BM

The only dialogues I really had with them were administrative for scheduling the travel and the games. At one point, Dean Baker wanted to get an art school league going and get it recognized as Division III. That's the level his program was at

and he needed teams to play, because if he played more orthodox programs, maybe it'd be more of a challenge.

RS

Could you tell me a little bit more about that game against Pratt in 2009?

BM

Yeah. As you can see it was a pretty good crowd, but Pratt was running late to the game, so we decided to pull some students out of the crowd for a half court shooting contest. Then a few students started yelling "Coach! Coach! Coach!" So I took my jacket off, I shot, and I made it!

Looking at these photos I'm remembering some of these players. I remember Toussaint Wallace. When he'd block a shot he'd get in your face with the finger wag like Dikembe Mutumbo.

Then there was Rose Curley, who was a knock down shooter. I told her "if you get the rock, shoot it, I don't care where you are". So she would slide down into the corner and somebody would slip her the ball and she'd nail a three from the coffin corner—all nylon. All these alpha male jocks on the other, although they were winning, you could tell it took the wind out of their sails.

A lot of the guys on the team were in Painting, and I think the reason for that is because I was talking up the team all the time. I'd ask students around the studio if they were interested in basketball and then tell them to try out for the team.

RS

What was it like being interviewed about the team by Bill Reynolds, considering his legendary status as a New England sportswriter?

BM

Billy Reynolds is a legend. He was a legend, he played at Brown where he was a pure shooter. I would go to Brown men's basketball games fairly regularly and was often there. Over time I got acquainted with him. I'd play squash over at Brown with a buddy of mine who's a Brown faculty member and I'd see Billy in the locker room because he played pick up basketball there well into his 60s.

So one day I'm in the locker room and I said "Billy, I want you to write about my kids. You'll understand them since you're an artist/athlete and that's what the team is, they have that side to them. They're not what you would consider the garden variety basketball player". Then he came over for a practice, he interviewed each student and got some background information, and then he chatted with me

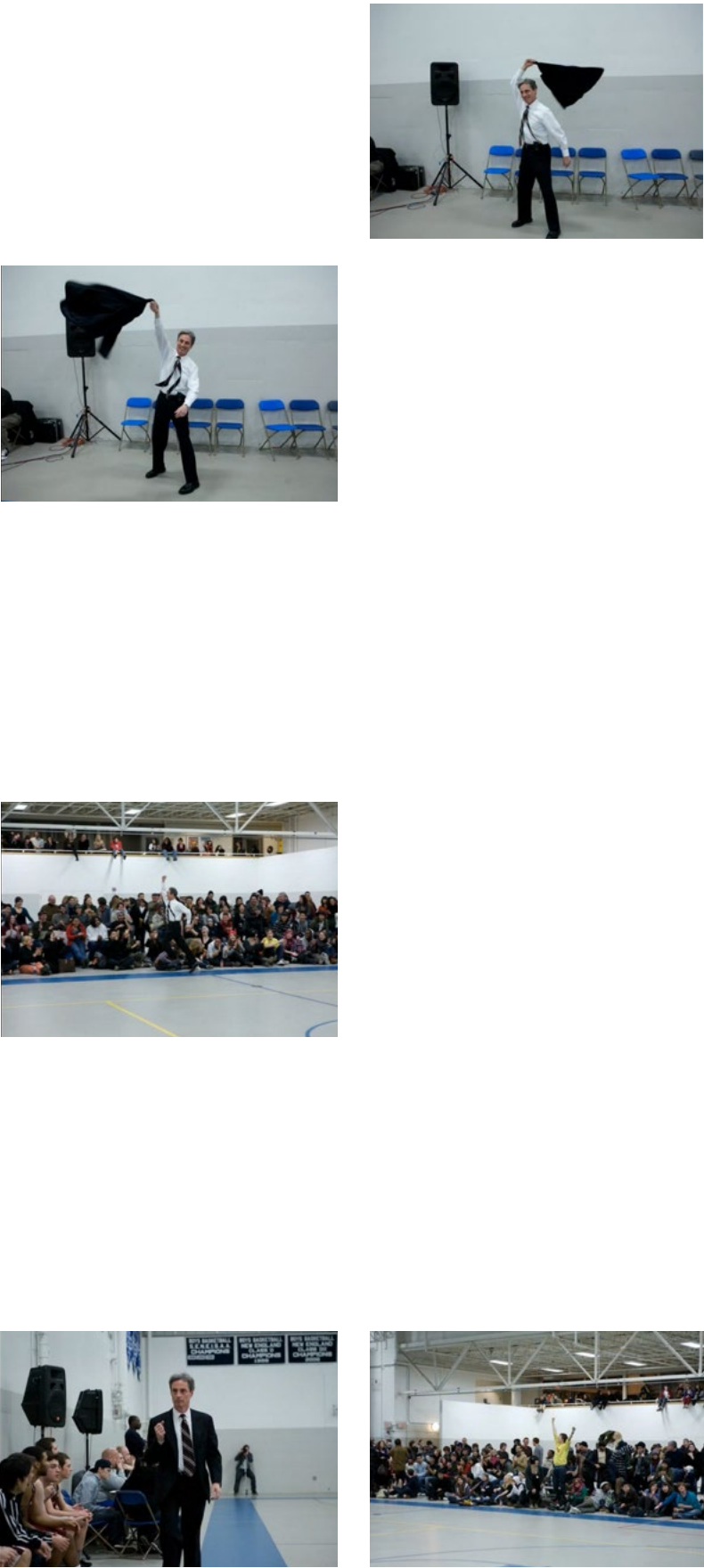


***I used to joke that this was all
performance art, and you need
an audience for that.***

***– Coach Bill Miller
91 PT***



◀▲ Photos from a game against Pratt at Wheeler School. January 16, 2009



for a bit. He later came to that Pratt game and wrote a really nice piece.

Billy was a poet, so he got it. He actually told me later that he got a ration of shit for that piece from other programs in the state like Rhode Island College who said he never went to games to cover them, shit like that.

He's a sensitive guy and writes engaging work. If they ever made a movie out of his material it wouldn't be like Rudy, it'd be a lot more real.

RS

What was the reputation of the team like during your time? Would you say the players were popular around campus?

BM

I used to joke that this was all performance art, and you need an audience for that. I was very vocal during every opportunity I had in the classroom and when I sat on an institutional committee with administrators and faculty to advocate for the team. I always wanted to get an article about the team in Sports Illustrated but it never happened.

RS

How did people react when you told them about the team? I know the recent RISD administration has their own opinions on the team and the naming conventions in general.

BM

It was a different time, man. Your generation is dealing with a certain cultural moment, and that moment had not yet arrived during my time with the team. While I was there, it was embraced in the spirit in which it was created: levity and the joy of participating.

I, for one, was enraged when they eliminated the sale of the merchandise from the store. Talk about free speech rights! It's just all bullshit.

RS

I know Roger Mandle was president of RISD during your coaching tenure and he was a big supporter of the team. Did you ever get to talk with him about the Balls one on one?

BM

Sometimes he would be on these committees that I served on, and so the classic structure of the meeting was you would go around and introduce yourself and tell everyone what you do for the institution. The first thing I'd say was: "I'm the coach of the RISD Balls", before I even said my position as

Painting Tech. That would get a few laughs. I'd joke about our record and then tell them how it's the most interdisciplinary activity on campus. It is an opportunity for students to get some recreation, for some exercise and balance the mind, body and spirit. The place is so fucking manic that it can be unhealthy at times, and here you have a chance to run around and let loose.

RS

What led to you "retiring" from coaching the Balls and letting Andrew Rogers take over?

BM

I would have continued. I was happy to continue, but I felt like fresh energy and a different point of view would take it to the next level. At the end of the day it isn't about me, it's about the students. The club should be student-run, student-initiated, and a student-sustained entity. I went to some games after I left and it was great.

I coached Byron too. He was probably the best basketball player I coached. He was easy going, charismatic, fun to be around, and he kind of inspired everyone around him. He was the logical choice to take over.

RS

What does the name of the team mean to you?

BM

The name and the logo is a genius embodiment of the entire spirit of club basketball at an art school. It's tongue-in-cheek. It's a parody of an alpha male environment.

You gotta have a sense of humor. I don't know where that's gone in the current culture, everything's so divisive these days. If the team took a more traditional approach, then it would blur the line between more serious programs and just fun recreation and humor.

RS

How has your time with the team affected your own artistic practice and what lessons learned from then have bled into the rest of your life?

BM

That's an interesting question. When I was a younger teacher instructing students in my color class, I thought my job was to just teach color. I'd say: "Hey, look at this red over here. Mix it with this blue and it turns violet, any questions? See you next week". Then, as I got a little wiser, I realized that what I'm here for is to help facilitate creativity. How

can color be used as a release of each individual's creative energy?

I also think of myself now as a mentor that tries to create an environment where individuals feel comfortable in their own skin and dispel all anxiety, like performance anxiety. I want to give students the confidence to know that the path they've chosen is a good one. That time where I was with the Balls was that transitional moment when I went from creativity to mentor.

Older people, if they know what they're doing, should help to anoint younger people with support and confidence so that they can find their career. This goes into my teaching philosophy. There's a shadow side of our beloved institution where a lot of talking is going on but creativity really comes out of the body and the spirit, which don't have to do with language at all. A lot of times when students come to me and they're upset they're not fully functioning, they say they're having some mental health concerns. The techs in the department hear more of that, because they're in a position to have these relationships with the students. The students feel comfortable unburdening themselves in a way that they might not with their studio faculty. Without the language of an academic setting, their mind and spirit is able to more freely express themselves through their work.

RS

Could you tell me one of your favorite memories with the team?

BM

During my first year coaching, it was ambiguous whether we were supposed to win the game or just have a few laughs. It was my fault, really, because I didn't ask for clarification. One of my first games was against Pratt at Pratt. I'm over on one side of the visiting team's locker room while the students are getting dressed for the game on the other. As I'm waiting I'm rehearsing my speech in my mind and figuring out what I'm going to say. When I walked over to the other side of the locker room, I heard two players in a heated argument over the best way to make salsa!

At that point I knew the furthest thing from their minds was the game. So I postponed the speech and we went out and had a few laughs.

●●



◀▶ Bill gets water dunked on him following a loss against Cooper Union.

Continues on following two spreads. February 26, 2010











▲ Gavin's portrait for the team.
c. 2010–2011

An interview with...

Gavin Engel 12 ID

The early 2010s were an especially popular time for the Balls. Maybe it was just the perfect storm of student interest and natural talent from the players, but games during this era saw some of the biggest and wildest crowds, though many might have had no interest in the game itself. Through the process of reaching out to former players, it was nice hearing Gavin's perspective. He was a former captain of the team but after graduation he moved on to his own career, and didn't stick around to become a coach. Gavin's story is like many I came across throughout the history of the Balls. Sometimes you just need an outlet to play the game you love, and if others around you want to act crazy and wild, then it can only add to the thrill of the game.

RYAN SCOTT

How many years were you involved with the team?

GAVIN ENGEL

I was at RISD for undergrad from 2008 to 2012 and graduated in Industrial Design. I was really only on the team for two and a half years. Freshman year, I was not able to play because I had an English class at the same time as practice. I played sophomore year through senior, and I went abroad for a semester in junior year. I became a captain during my junior year and served as captain with Bryon Olson and Jacob Garcia. It was an incredible experience. We were all there to do our RISD art and design education, but basketball was an incredible outlet for us on the team. It was a lot of fun for everyone who showed up to the games.

RS

Could you tell me a little bit about your history with the game of basketball before you came to RISD?

GE

I have been playing basketball since I was a very little kid. I never played at a super high level, but I did play in town recreation leagues. My dad coached me for a number of years in the town rec leagues, and so it was just always something close to who

I am. I played freshman and junior varsity in high school, but never made it to varsity. I wasn't really at that level. It was great to be able to continue playing in college, even though we were focused on design.

RS

When did you first become aware of the RISD Balls?

GE

It wasn't until I arrived freshman year I found out about the team. I don't remember being aware of it going into college. I was more focused on the core work that I was going to experience, and the degree I was going to go after, than being able to play basketball.

RS

What were some of your favorite teammates to play with on the team?

GE

We had a really great team, and I imagine other people would say that too. The dynamic was solid with our crew. I'm on the quieter side, so it was interesting watching other people express themselves and the relationships the team created. Byron Olson and Gavin Simmons were cool guys that I'm still friends with. Jacob Garcia, Greg Norton, Adrian Richardson, Cooper O'Brien, and so on. Just a bunch of different personalities. Touissant Wallace was a great one too. I also want to shout out Stephanie del Vecchio, a woman who played with us for a year or two and brought a lot to the team. That was sick, too.

It was fun. It was a release from the workload. We did those bus trips together as a team down to New York and a few overnights. It was great to just hang out in that setting.

RS

What do you remember about the other teams?

GE

We all had our slot in the rankings. I felt like us and Pratt were actually the biggest rivalry. I felt like most of the time Cooper Union had our number, and we had MassArt pretty much under control. Sarah Lawrence, we usually got the best of.

RS

Do you remember who the coaches were during your time? I've spoken to Bill Miller and also Byron Olson who said there was another coach that you guys voted to fire, or something like that.

GE

I'll give that guy his grace in retrospect, he helped us. Bill Miller was a coach when I started. He exited coaching after my first year and passed the torch to some of us on the team and it became more student led. Someone that he knew, Henry Hanley, became our next coach, and he was a serious basketball coach, he was very competitive. It just wasn't the right match for the team and for the fact that we had intense workloads and practice once a week, and it was a student club, and he was running it like a Division II basketball team, it just didn't work out. So we parted ways with him, and Byron's cousin, who was in law school, Andrew Rodgers, stepped in, and he was a great match for the team.

RS

You were awarded the Joe Gebbia Award for basketball leadership during your senior year in 2012, what was that experience like?

GE

It was very cool. It did mean something to me. Joe was obviously a big leader. I didn't really know about it beforehand, but it was cool to be recognized by the school. A bunch of us put a lot of effort into keeping that program running, and it was nice to be recognized. I didn't take the award with a ton of "gravity", but I felt like it was a really kind gesture from the school.

RS

What other fond memories do you have of your time on the RISD Balls?

GE

I don't know why this one comes to mind, but when we did a New York trip and stayed in a hostel in Manhattan, pretty close to Cooper Union, we all ran up to the NBA store before the game. Strolling around New York with a bunch of classmates from RISD was pretty fun.

▼ Gavin taking a free throw in a game against Cooper Union. April 4, 2012



▲ Gavin (left) in a game against Pratt. January 20, 2012

I feel like people who don't really play sports sometimes are not as aware of how much competitive sports builds community and builds relationships. It did that for us. Going up to the gym, having people fill the stands and people in the crowd yelling vulgar things at us while we're shooting foul shots made the atmosphere memorable. I remember my girlfriend at the time used to yell, "put it in deep!" when I was shooting foul shots. Everything was sexually charged there because of the names of the teams and because of the legacy of the mascot. Everyone was looking for creative ways to say something edgy and provocative.

There was a class called Creature Creations that worked in collaboration with Big Nazo, a studio downtown, and they made foam costumes of monsters. We had one or two games where people from that class came to the gym in their monster costumes and were pushing the boundaries of what they could get away with. They stood behind the basket while we were playing and doing their thing. I thought that was really fun. It was very much a blend of RISD basketball and the rest of the school.

RS

After you graduated, did your time on the team influence any of your work or your approach to collaboration in a more professional setting? Did you continue playing basketball after?

GE

I'm still playing. I play in a league outside of the city once a week.

I learned a lot about leadership from Don Morton and Bill Miller. How to distribute workload, and how to understand what was needed. By actually giving people things to do it would get them more energized and engaged, rather than having the perception that you don't want to put work on people's shoulders, so you'll do it yourself.

I guess I got a hot take to share with you. It might be controversial, but just an idea to float. Part of me feels that I would love to see "RISD Basketball" be its own thing and not be a little bit, if I may say, handicapped by the silliness of the Balls. I know that there's a duality to that. And in some ways, it's very fun, but the fact that you can't have the mascot running around and you can't sell the merch in the store, I feel like there's something about playing competitive basketball that's exciting, and that still has all those core things that the Balls have.





Everything was sexually charged. Everyone was looking for ways to say something edgy and provocative.



– Gavin Engel 12 ID



▲ Don before the Balls vs Nads
dodgeball match. March 12, 2010

An interview with...

Don Morton

Don Morton is the former Director of the Center for Student Involvement (CSI), formerly known as the Office of Student Life (OSL). For 21 years he helped serve the RISD community and better connect with student organizations to make sure they received the help they needed. After coming to RISD in the mid 1990s, Don was a witness to the rise of the RISD Balls the following decade and is often cited in publications and newspapers from over the years as an avid supporter of the team. Equal to his love for the unorthodox sports teams and student culture at RISD is his passion for making sure that their missions are clear and interest grows, as he shares my dream for groups like the Balls to be better recognized by the school today and its legacy is well preserved for future audiences.

DON MORTON

There were many things we had under our umbrella at CSI, such as community service, clubs and organizations, event planning, the students who ran the Carr Haus coffee shop, the Student Fitness Center (SFC) and so on. All we did had to do with our primary objective to create opportunities for self authorship — that is, internal authority.

When you come to RISD, you learn a lot about how to develop your craft, but how do you apply that once you get out of here? Many art students will have to fend for themselves, as they are not all going to just plug into a corporate job. Joe Gebbia is a prime example of making the best of this environment. Not only did he play basketball, but he wrote the Balls Initiative, which covers everything you need to know about the club and even things that you would just not think of unless you really sat down and read through it.

What's good about the captains of a team like the Balls is that they are really an integral part of keeping these things alive and going. It doesn't happen without that kind of on site leadership. There's nothing like surprising people outside of RISD that you can actually play hoops. That's why the Nads got their name, because they had the "gonads" to play. They beat Brown the year they formed, and it was just like Byron Olson and the flag football team

he played on when he was here. I remember going to the flag football league championship when it was held on top of a building at Brown. When I got there, they were in the last quarter and controlling the game and finally, with two minutes to go, they started running the clock out. There's no way Brown can stop them. Then the lights go out. We can't see anything. The people at Brown came back and told us we're gonna have to reschedule the game. We said, "the game's over, you can't even possibly win? We're just gonna come back and run the clock out". But Brown insisted on finishing the game another day, and when they rescheduled the game, they didn't show up. Bastards! There was definitely some emotional damage done there to Brown after that.

RYAN SCOTT

Yeah there have been a lot of moments like that for the Balls, whether it was winning the NASBI in 2014 or finally beating Cooper Union that same year. It felt good to shock everyone that we could be artists and athletes.

DM

But it really wasn't about winning most of the time. The games gave RISD students an excuse not to work—and they needed a good one—that somehow this was a social, fun thing to do, so the Balls provided a service to them. There was a game once against Pratt at Wheeler where the team showed up hours after the game was supposed to start, but while we waited in front of a packed gym we put on music and started playing these kinds of improvisational shooting contests. I would say 10% of the audience left. That tells you how important these games were to the student community and they weren't going to miss it. Furthermore, when we lost the game, the music came back on, and it was a dance party in the middle of the court. Pratt's coaches looked over at me, looked at the scoreboard, and just asked "am I missing something?"

RS

I've spoken to Bill Miller about his time as coach of the Balls in the mid 2000s, what do you remember about the team around that time?

DM

Before that, the coach we had for the team was a basketball coach from Wheeler, but he had this real hard edge coach thing. He was not a RISD coach, you had to understand your clients. But Bill Miller, he played that role well and the two of us explored a little more about the culture and how to make it

successful. One of the great things we were able to do was that collaboration with Converse. At the time their sneaker designers were working on this shoe that had a little window in the sole and inside were a bunch of little balls. And so when Bill and I went up to Boston to talk to them about possibly incorporating the Balls team and having some kind of partnership, their team started coming up with all of these really risqué innuendo jokes that were even more raunchy than the stuff our students were coming up with. But then the women at Converse got involved in design and were appalled and the idea quickly died thereafter.

RS

Speaking of these outside collaborations and publicity for the school, how did you feel about Bill Reynolds coming to a Balls game and writing an article for the Providence Journal?

DM

It was great. It's been a while since I've read it but someone like Bill Reynolds who has been around the game for so long, he understands that it's not always about winning. It was a nice perspective and one that should be shared each year with the team.

RS

How did the students and wider RISD community and organizations like CSI promote Balls games and similar events during your time?

DM

OSL used to put out a weekly online newsletter called Word Out that shared information about upcoming events.

RS

Yeah we have a website called Involved now that I guess does the same job but maybe not as well.

DM

Much of the promotion and planning was student-led, and this again gets back to my point about recognizing the importance of self authorship while at a place like RISD. Nowadays, we're past the information age and now we're in the thinking age where you have to ask yourself: what do I do with all of this? Critical thinkers are the lifeblood of RISD and are the new pioneers. We're cultivating people that are going to think out of the box. I would have a circle of people around a conference room when I was working here made up of students in all these disciplines that didn't make any sense to what we're discussing but still had these incredibly unique

perspectives. Talk about diversity, it was diversity of thought I was so privileged to work around and I was spoiled rotten by it.

You have to have community experience at RISD, and I've heard that called the "third space". This thing that's community oriented not only engages you in the broader world, it actually affects you, not obviously emotionally, but physically and cognitively.

RS

Yeah I think of the team as that third space where students from all these different majors can come together and create something, either on or off the court. I've thought about this too in context of the recent RISD rebrand and how the motivation of players to print their own shirts and make their own merch circumvents this new wall that's been placed between the public-facing side of the school and the weird parts of the school's culture.

DM

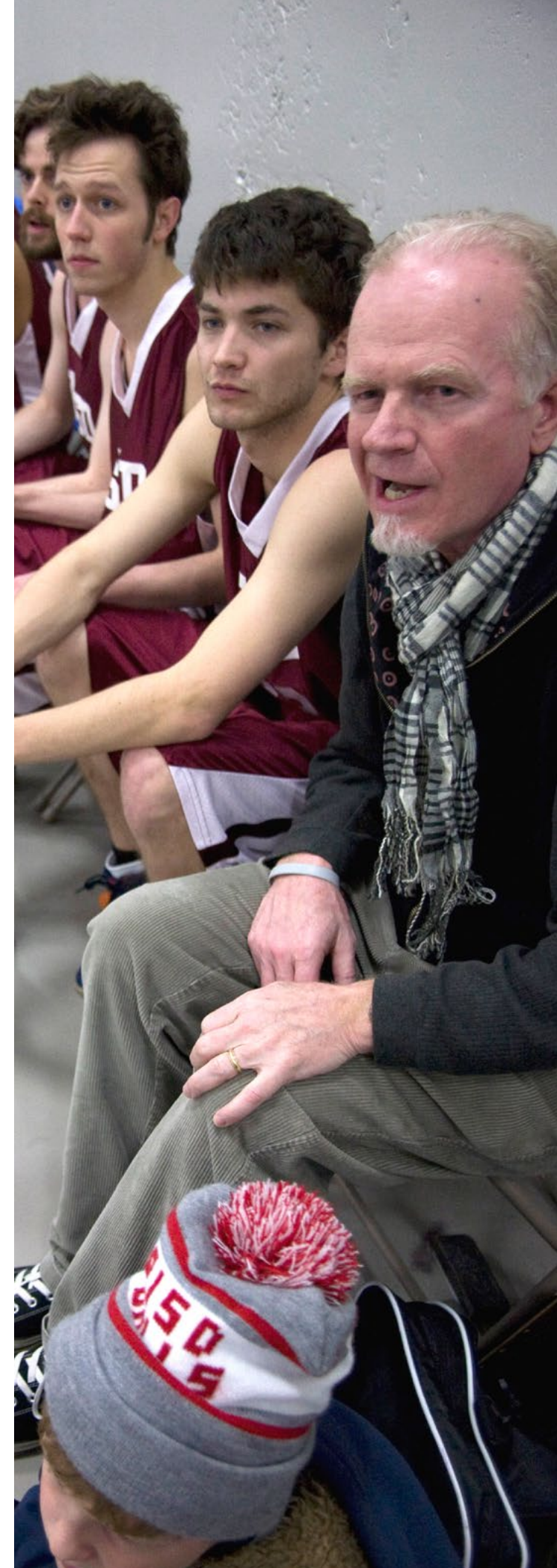
We are an art school, and I think that's why we can have an unofficial penis mascot in the first place. I once sat in my car with my son at a red light near the RISD Beach. He was seven years old at the time, and he saw Scrotie running around the Beach. He asked "Dad, what is that?" because at that time the costume was very cartoony and you could kind of tell what it was but it wasn't super explicit. But he couldn't believe it, and I told him it is what he thinks it is, and he just said "why?" That's the big question.

I don't think the school should be conservative, not politically obviously, but it has to take itself seriously and so do its students in their endeavors. There was a time when the students remade Scrotie, but it was way too graphic. It was engorged with thick veins and pubic hair and purple testicles and so on, it was ridiculous. There was nothing to the imagination. There was a meeting held in the Tap Room with hundreds of students and once the women in the community were involved, we began asking if this was the right choice for the mascot, and the answer was no. When you Google RISD, Scrotie is one of the first things that pops up about the school, so it was important to consider how far we could take the joke before it stopped being funny and was just grotesque.

Here's a similar example of going too far. In 2007 the Red Bull Soapbox Race came to Providence and they set up the event going down the hill on Waterman Street where students from Brown and RISD as well as the general community could build

little vehicles and see how far they could go. It

► Don (right) during a game against Pratt. February 5, 2010



The games gave RISD students an excuse not to work—and they needed a good one—that somehow this was a social, fun thing to do, so the Balls provided a service to them.

– Don Morton

wasn't about winning but more about the creativity of the racers. There was one guy who came down on a toilet with four wheels and shower curtain, it was hysterical! So all of this was an opportunity for people to have fun and design something special. So what did the RISD student team make? They built a giant hot dog that had "biggest weiner in the smallest state" written on the side as an obvious penis joke. So the team came down the first turn and there was a camera there for television, but they edited our team out. Congratulations. Was that fun? You and the rest of the school weren't represented because you had to make the joke. This was an opportunity to be seen nationally and recognized as one of the greatest art schools in the world and we missed that mark.

RS

It was just too far?

DM

Yeah, there were families there and they can't show that stuff to their kids. Just the hot dog would have been fine but all of the signage just makes it be too much.

Similarly, the Balls were banned from Wheeler for some time after an open house at the school was held and parents walked into the gym during a game and found Scrotie dry humping Cooper Union's mascot. In the process of a staged fight their eagle mascot's head flew off to reveal this long blonde hair of the woman playing the character, so the image of this seven foot penis assaulting this woman did not make Wheeler laugh.

But back to your earlier question about promotion, I found out through my time at RISD that students love themed events, especially ones where they have to dress up. When the Artist Ball comes around, hardly anyone is ordering their costumes — they're creating them, and the event sells out every year! There was one event I remember where students could get a free ticket to a new movie screening at the mall, but they had to come in a costume themed around the film. We gave away close to a hundred tickets and each student made their own costume, it was incredible.

In basketball they talk about the fans as the "sixth man", and fans of the RISD Balls filled that role perfectly. There were people coming in costumes, making signs, women making out under the basket while the other team shot free throws, just anything we wanted to do. The games are the most packed when there is an environment that students want to be in, so letting them lead it themselves lets them shape it into whatever they want it to be.

For things like merch, make it rare, put a date on it. These things become the most desirable when it can be seen out in the world and everyone else is asking where they can get one.



2016-2026

COOPER UNION, YOU WILL PAY

The 2015–2016 Balls were made up of students like Rocky Hayden 17 PT, Conner Griffith 16 FAV, Forest O’Donoghue 16 ID, Malik Sealy 19 FAV, Michael Zhang 18 ID, Peihan Wang 17 MDES, Zihan Zhang 17 FD, Mike Moyal 16 ID, Vaughan Lewis Carman 18 AP, Shawn Guo 18 GD, Dennis Staton 16 MLA, Manny Hernandez 16 GD, Rob Calise 18 BArch, Luke Gordon 16 ID, and Silas Cheo 17 PT. The team opened up their fourteenth season of play with an October 10 alumni game at Brown’s Pizzitola Center and then a November 7 game against Hampshire that ended in a closely fought 56–53 loss. Perhaps trying to test their skill level, the Balls then faced Providence College a week later, but were understandably destroyed 87–30. I would guess they played their bench players or it was their club team because otherwise the score would be something like 200–12. To lift their spirits, a game against MassArt the next week was an easy 79–23 victory, but a December 4 game against the Brown Basketball Club team brought them back down with a 73–58 loss.

► Balls poster shared on Facebook. October 10, 2015



The next three games of the season against New England Baptist, Clark College, and MassArt all resulted in victories, and perhaps were a test for the February 5 game against Cooper Union, the first time they had faced each other since being defeated in last year’s Northeast Art School Basketball Invitational (NASBI). Posters for the game, designed by Manny Hernandez 16 GD, made it clear the Balls were out for blood, saying “Cooper Union, YOU WILL PAY”. Sadly, Cooper Union did not pay...

The 2016 NASBI ended with similar disappointment, as the Balls lost to New School 68–60 but beat MassArt 65–36 during the consolation game.

There isn’t much recorded of the 2016–2017 season, but the only important thing to know about that year is that the Balls managed to beat Cooper Union 82–71 for the first time since their victory over them way back in 2014.

The 2017–2018 season featured players like Dorian Epps 21 ID, Jack Yuen 19 GD, Malik Sealy 19 FAV, Michael Zang 18 ID, Shawn Guo 18 GD, Trey Hollinger 21 GD, Vaughan Lewis Carman 18 AP, Wes Sanders 19 MDES, Jared Goodwin 19 PT, Jimmy Cheng, Adrian Roop 18 FD, James Warren 22 PT, Victor Gu, and Xavier Hardison 20 PT. There isn’t a lot of information about specific games for this season either but the team had at least a 4–2 record going into the NASBI tournament in March 2018, which included a 72–40 victory over New England Baptist and a 67–62 win over Cooper Union.

The 2018–2019 also lacked details from team records and online sources, but there were at least two games that season against Pratt

which both ended in losses. The team for that season featured Xavier Hardison 20 PT, Jack Yuen, Malik Sealy 19 FAV, James Warren 22 PT, Zoo Somiani, Joe Inglema 23 BArch, Joshua Sun 22 IL, Ryan Lee, Jason Liao 23 ID, Gabriel Lei 24 BArch, Madhav Dutta IL, Trey Hollinger 21 GD and Dorian Epps 21 ID.

BLUE BALLS

Following a pretty obscure Balls Instagram page from 2013 that never reached even a hundred

▼ Balls team photo. c. 2016–2017





followers and years of promoting events through a Facebook page, the Balls reinvented themselves in October of 2019 with a new Instagram account and a new, blue logo. A new jersey, photoshoots in the Wheeler Gym, and a countdown to their first game of the season against Pratt on February 16, 2020 was all centered around their new identity as the “Blue Balls”. Ironically, the Balls themselves turned blue before RISD eventually did during their massive rebrand initiative a few years later. Unfortunately, the new team made up of Joe Inglema 23 BArch, Trey Hollinger 21 GD, Sam Berenfield 20 IL, Joshua Sun 22 IL, Dorian Epps 21 ID, Nate Krohn 23 GD, WenYu Huang 22 IL, Jason Liao 23 ID, Jeff Ye 23 ID, Leon Lau 23 ID, Eddy Sohn 26 BArch, didn’t last too long under their new name, as anyone familiar with 2020 will easily infer.

On top of an 89–52 loss to the Pratt Cannoneers, the team also lost a bet they had made beforehand, where RISD’s President at the time, Rosanne Somerson, would have to eat a New York style chili dog and admit defeat. The team had brought their own “Rhody Style Hot Weiners” in the event they came out on top but were forced to take the loss. Fortunately, it seems the bet was never followed through so the team never suffered any further embarrassment.

On March 3, 2020 the first positive case of COVID was reported in Rhode Island, and a few weeks later, the entire country was in lockdown. Coincidentally, I was visiting RISD just a few days before the lockdown began during my sophomore year in high school, and was

▲ Balls team photo. c. 2017–2018

► Blue Balls photoshoot at Wheeler by Anita Qian 21 PH. January 2020



able to grab a Balls mug and Nads patch before I could return to campus two years later as an admitted student.

Please refer to the interview with Dorian Epps for more details about the team during the COVID lockdown, but it is not an exaggeration to say that the time away from campus nearly killed the team. It wasn’t until April 2021 that the team could play another game, and with so much turnover with players and programs like Cooper Union folding and Pratt distancing themselves from non Division III schools, the future was uncertain to say the least.

POST COVID PLAY

The Balls of the 2021–2022 season dropped the blue and wore dark maroon and gray uniforms designed by teammate and future captain Gresh Chapman 25 ID. Due to the slow return to normalcy during this time, only one “real” game was held against MassArt on April 29, 2022 at Providence Country Day School. Though it had been over two years since the team had last taken the court against another school, the small gym was packed with at least a hundred students who held posters reading “MASSACRE” alongside an image of JFK with a blood splatter behind his head. Another sign that simply read “GOD I FUCKING LOVE BALLS” was made by a group of freshman students and was signed by members of the team up until their graduation in 2025. The team would defeat Massart 80–56, thanks to the continued leadership of Byron Olson and assistant coach Brandon Morris of the team made up of Joshua Sun 22 IL, Jason Liao 23 ID, Joe Inglema 23 BArch, Leon Lau 23 ID, Jupiter Shi 25 BArch, Jay Huang, Kai Gietzen 22 IL, Nate Krohn 23 GD, Tem Metanmi 24 FAV, Samuel Li 25 ID, Morris Lin 26 BArch, Ryan Huang 25 SC, Ak Adebamgbe 25 IL, Harbor Bai 25 ID, Austin Belanger 25 ID, Sam Ma 25 BArch, Gresh Chapman 25 ID.

On May 13, 2022, the Balls concluded their season with a game against Public Safety. In the past the team had held games against faculty and other staff members, but by framing the game as a face off against the campus police force, it allowed for even more creative promotional graphics as the team continues to square off against the “Defenders of the Arts” to this day. Technically the Public Safety team included some non campus police employees and some local teenagers, but the Balls still managed to defeat them 56–54.

Past this point you’ll notice that the writing will shift from mostly third person to pretty much entirely first person, as I first came to RISD during the fall of 2022 as a freshman and have experienced



◀▶ The Blue Balls following a loss to Pratt in New York. February 16, 2020



2016-2026



◀▶▶ Photos from games against MassArt and Public Safety at the Providence Country Day School. April 29, 2022 & May 13, 2022



much of the history from then until now firsthand. The team for the 2022–2023 season was made up of Leon Lau 23 ID, Joe Inglima 23 BArch, Jason Liao 23 ID, Nate Krohn 23 GD, Jupiter Shi 25 BArch, Tem Metanmi 24 FAV, Sam Ma 25 BArch, Samuel Li 25 ID, Gresh Chapman 25 ID, Morris Lin 26 BArch, Austin Belanger 25 ID, Ak Adebamgbe 26 IL, Ryan Huang 25 SC, Harbor Bai 25 ID, Eddy Sohn BArch 26, Sam Zhan Jr. 26 ID, Ryan Scott 26 GD and was coached by Byron Olson, Brandon Morris, and Dorian Epps who now joined as an assistant coach.

That season, with all RISD Balls and Nads slowly removed from the RISD Store following an order by RISD’s new President Crystal Williams, Gresh Chapman took the initiative to begin screenprinting



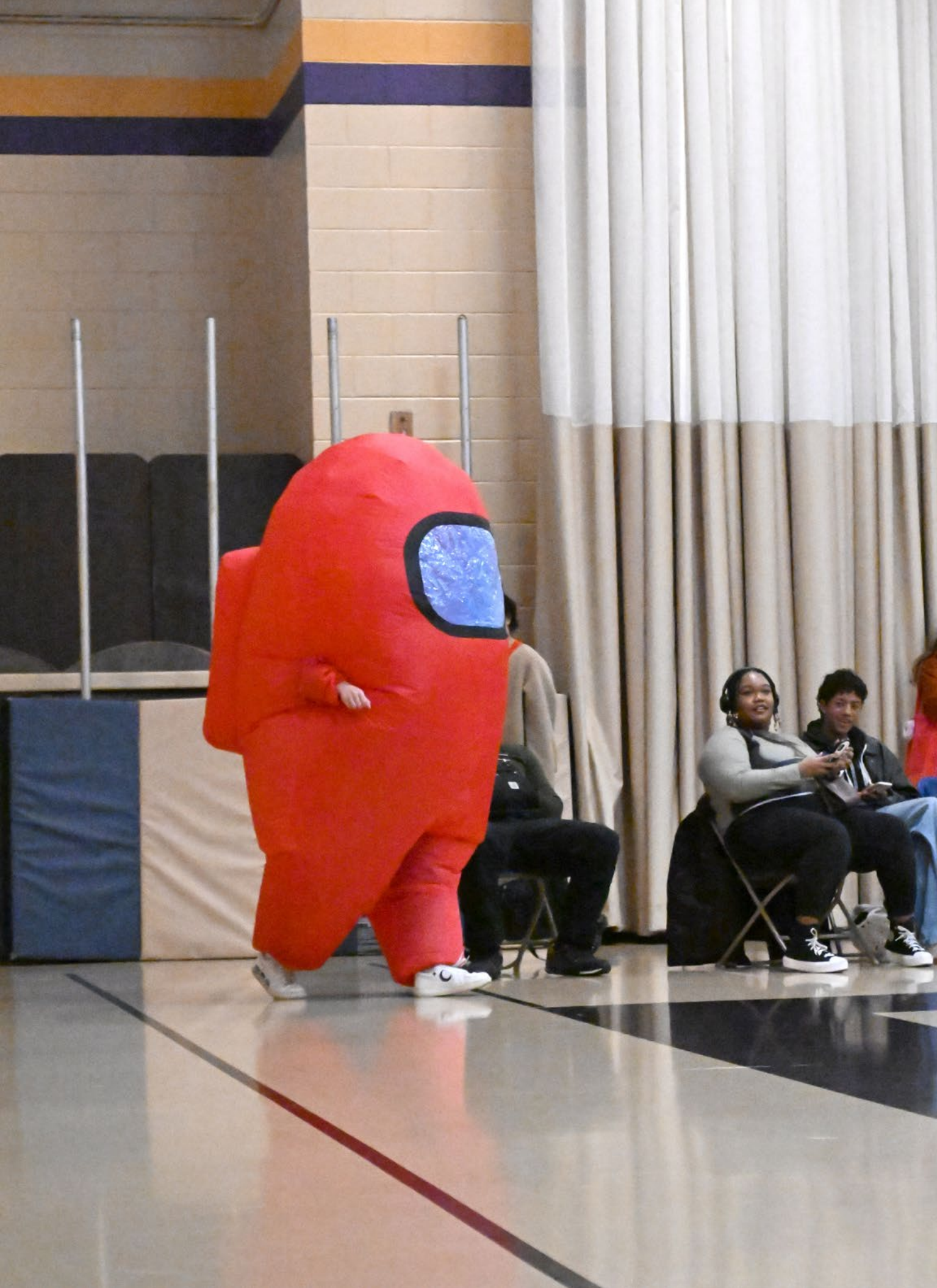
shirts himself. You can learn more about the details during my interview with him, but thanks to taking the Two Legged Print class during Wintersession of 2022, Gresh had access to the screens, inks, and printing space he needed. Shirts were sourced from the local Savers and became instant hits as they were not only a rare commodity but thrived on humorous juxtapositions of shirts featuring famous logos, tie dye patterns, or other non sequiturs now covered with the classic Balls logo. The shirts were first introduced during the annual RISD

▲► Photos throughout the season taken by Sitarah Lakhani 26 ID.
Continues on next five spreads.
c. 2022–2023













Craft sale on October 8, 2022 and were sold at a majority of home games throughout the season, adding extra incentive for fans to come and watch the game until at least halftime.

Like many other seasons, the Balls began their schedule with an inter-team scrimmage that came to be referred to as “Balls on Balls”. Sometimes these games will feature one side made up of returning players and the other made up of newbies, but it is often just a fun way to get into gametime speed and have an early event for fans to come to.

Unfortunately, the Balls would drop their first four games against Landmark College, Fisher College, Brown Club Team, and Hampshire College. January gave the team a break with the alumni game and Public Safety game. The Balls would then win their rematch against Landmark later that month, but drop another game against Fisher. The next two games against New School were split with one win and one loss, but the season ended strong with two back to back wins against MassArt.



The 2023–2024 season was rough to say the least. Wheeler School had raised their rates for renting out gym space, so the Balls were forced to practice and play most of their games at Madeline Rogers Recreation Center on Camden Avenue, a ten minute drive versus the ten minute walk that made it easy for both players to walk to practices and RISD students to walk to games on the weekend. Byron Olson stepped away from coaching that year as well, and after a short stint as head coach, Brandon Morris also left, and Dorian Epps was brought in to take over. Tryouts were not held until November 6, which was very late compared to other years. What I can remember from that tryout is about five new players showed up, and they all immediately made the team because we needed the numbers. For reference, the year before at least 40 students showed up to tryouts at Wheeler.

The team that season was made up of Jupiter Shi 25 BArch, Tem Metanmi 24 FAV, Sam Ma 25 BArch, Gresh Chapman 25 ID, Morris Lin 26 BArch, Austin Belanger 25 ID, Ak Adebamgbe 25 IL, Ryan Huang 25 SC, Harbor Bai 25 ID, Sam Zhan Jr. 26 ID Ryan Scott 26 GD, Liam Lin 28 BArch, Andrea Shin 26 ID, Andy Oh (left for Korean military

◀ Balls team photo. c. 2023

► Photos from a win against Hampshire College and a button making event hosted at Carr Haus Cafe. November 23, 2024 & January 23, 2025



service after season), David Cha 27 ID, Freddie Fernandes 25 PT, and Gary Li 24 ID. The first game of the season didn’t come until December 9 when we lost to MassArt, which wasn’t a good sign of things to come, since they were usually a team we beat without issue. However after games against Landmark, New School, and at least one other team that I can’t remember, the record improved to 3–1. A game against the Brown Club Team in mid March brought us back down with a blowout loss, and another loss to New School at home did not help morale. However an April 20 game that became both a Public Safety and Alumni game allowed us a break from the season, but a week later on April 27 Senior Night ended on a sour note with a loss to MassArt.

Gresh would step away the following season during his senior year to focus on other clubs and work, so I took over the screenprinting duties, Instagram graphic creation, and other captain duties. The team 2024–2025 team was made up of Jupiter Shi 25 BArch, Sam Ma 25 BArch, Morris Lin 26 BArch, Ak Adebamgbe 25 IL, Ryan Huang 25 SC, Harbor Bai 25 ID, Sam Zhan Jr. 26 ID, Ryan Scott 26 GD, Liam Lin 28 BArch, Josh Lee (left for Korean military service after season), David Cha 27 ID, Coen Sylvia 27 BArch, Azaria Smallwood 26 AP, Robert Koukios 28 AP, Jack Yicong Zhu 28 GD, Harry Hines (left after EFS), Lizzy Duke-Moe 26 Brown, Yilin Liu 28 ID, Zachary Avinoam 28 ID, and Kayin Bann 28 IL as we continued to practice and play games at Madeline Rogers. Again the season opened with a Balls on Balls scrimmage on October 18, but was soon followed by a loss to Landmark on November 9. On November 23, the Balls would defeat Hampshire College 73–57, and as of February 2026, its the last “real” game we’ve won, so don’t get your hopes up for the rest of this history. On January 23, 2026, since I also worked at Carr Haus Cafe, I hosted an event in their cafe space to make custom Balls pins to help promote our first ever game against the Culinary Institute of America. Obviously that game was a loss and so was another against Landmark in early March, but in another moment of cross campus collaboration, I printed some custom Nads x Balls shirts for the Nads annual Winter Classic that were handed out during the game.

Unfortunately an alumni game couldn’t be scheduled that year, so a May 3 game against Public Safety acted as the season finale and Senior Night game, with pizza and free merch for anyone who came. The game drew a decent crowd, especially compared to past events at Madeline Rogers, but it was still nowhere near the levels it would reach at Wheeler.



▲ Photo from a game against
Landmark College at Landmark.
January 27, 2024



▲ The "GOD I FUCKING LOVE BALLS" poster owned by Ethan Burke 25 IL and Ronen Lesser 25 IL. Courtesy of Catie Witherwax 25 IL. c. 2025

◀ Photos from a game against the Culinary Institute of America at their campus in Hyde Park, NY. January 25, 2025

WHAT A WAY TO CELEBRATE OUR ANNIVERSARY?

The 2025–2026 team, whose season is still ongoing as I write this, is made up of Ryan Scott 26 GD, Azaria Smallwood 26 AP, Morris Lin 26 BArch, Liam Lin 28 BArch, David Cha 27 ID, Robert Koukios 28 AP, Jack Yicong Zhu 28 GD, Sam Zjr 26 ID, Yilin Liu 28 GD, Kayin Bann 28 IL, Zachary Avinoam 28 ID, Filip Korch 29 PT, Isaac Robinette 29 PT, Cherry Li 28 PT, Marcella Favela 29, Jenny Stageberg 26 March, Kate Saruta Rasrivisuth 29 PT, Maurya Choudary 29 ID, Shawn Du 28 ID, Pascal Connolly 28 SC, Lai Wei 28 SC, William Qian 29 BAarch, and Eugene Chung 28 BArch.

You could probably tell by the roster, but this year we had a much better turnout for tryouts, with two rounds having to be held. All practices and games were held at Wheeler, helping with attendance of both players and fans. An early game against Public Safety on October 10 was actually held before tryouts, which came a few days later on



▲ Photos from the Public Safety game to end the 2024–2025 season. May 3, 2025

October 14, and a Balls on Balls game didn't come until November 1. To celebrate the team's 25th year of existence, I went back to the original Balls logo from 2001, cleaned it up a little, and embraced the red color palette that's been a part of basketball teams at RISD from the beginning. The team had been sporting blue jerseys for a few seasons at that point but I figured it would be best to go back to our roots for the special year, which was also commemorated with a special patch ironed on to our jerseys.

The first home game of the season wasn't held until December 5 against Fisher College, and although it ended in a loss, it was well attended. To promote the game I sold shirts on the RISD Beach and gave away free stickers the week prior. It wasn't until Wintersession that we actually got our jersey orders shipped, having played a few



away games against Landmark and other home exhibition games in just our orange practice jerseys. On January 31 the Culinary Institute of America came to Providence for the first time to face us. Wheeler was the most packed I had seen in years, and the atmosphere was great just to be there. In the end we fell just two points short of victory after some last minute errors but we had fans, a team photographer, and merch to sell — everything we really needed. Another game against Landmark, this time at home, was played on February 13, but ended in a 100–69. Away games against Landmark College and the Culinary Institute of America were scheduled for late February but the great Blizzard of 2026 ruined our travel plans. In early March we were able to reschedule a game against the Culinary Institute of America, but it ended in a blowout loss that came nowhere close to as competitive as our first game against them earlier that season. On the bright side, their dining hall gave us some free lasagna, garlic bread, and salad afterwards to help nurse our wounds on the three and a half hour bus ride home. As of late March 2026, the next Alumni game is scheduled for April 11 and a potential Public Safety rematch should happen later that month. I hope, whatever the outcome, that the results are recorded on our Instagram (@risd.balls) for future readers to view and see how everything turned out!

But that’s where we are now, with a winless season and no wins at all since November 2023, but if you read this far do you really think the record is the part I cared about?



▼ Photos by Zachary Rittenhousesmith 29 from a game against the Culinary Institute of America.
Continues on next four spreads.
January 31, 2026











◀▲ Embroidered underwear and jockstraps designed by James Burgat 26 GD. April 2026



▲ Byron photographed by Rob Chron. February 2014

An interview with...

Coach Byron Olson '12 IL

If you have been around RISD basketball for any considerable amount of time from 2009 to today, then you know Byron Olson. It may be hard to pinpoint who the “Michael Jordan” of the Balls was, but Byron is 100% the Phil Jackson. A former basketball player at MassArt turned RISD Ball turned NASBI championship coach, Byron is one of the most committed leaders the team has ever seen, and though I was only able to play under him for one season during my freshman year, I still remember his warm presence and competitive spirit at practice and especially in games. He was the first person I met during the annual RISD club fair called Block Party, and perhaps caught by my 6'5" frame, he made sure that I tried out for the team. Without his enthusiasm, I don't think I would have joined the team and I definitely would not be writing this book.

RYAN SCOTT

From my own experience I know you've been involved with the RISD Balls for a long time. When did you graduate from RISD and how long have you helped with the team as a player and later as a head coach?

BYRON OLSON

I graduated in 2012 from the Illustration department, and I played on the team for all three years I was at RISD after transferring from MassArt. I started as a sophomore and Bill Miller was my coach, he was great. The team was a true basketball team during my time, really solid, bro.

So like I said I graduated in 2012 and then the following fall I was an assistant coach and we brought in my cousin to coach us. He had also coached my senior year because Bill left after my sophomore year and then there was a replacement guy who CSI just found and nobody on the team knew. We gave this guy every chance, but we could not deal with him. We came together as a team and decided to fire him. We didn't want RISD basketball to turn into what it was becoming. He was way too much of a drill sergeant. He wasn't used to what this thing was. He didn't know anything about the culture here on campus, so we had to let him go.

So I mentioned I had a cousin in the area named



People walking down the street would just hop in and start playing. The game has always been my physical outlet.

When I got to high school, I really started to get into it. I started to really appreciate what the game was for me. I played on my high school team as a freshman and we were undefeated, bro, an undefeated freshman basketball team. Then we lost in the playoffs, ridiculously. Our first loss was in the semi finals. We should have swept the season and won the whole thing, but we lost to

◀ Andrew Rogers (left) coaching during a game against Pratt. January 20, 2012

our biggest rival, La Salle. That's a huge Rhode Island rivalry. La Salle, the private school, and East Providence, the public school. It was brutal.

That summer I tore my ACL, so I had to take off my entire sophomore year of sports. After that the coach of the varsity team wanted me to come back, but I was not feeling this guy. He was another drill sergeant type, I just couldn't stand him. I decided I'm not going to play for this guy. I was skateboarding at the time too. I was way more into skateboarding and I decided to go play volleyball instead. That was a great move, because I love volleyball. I ended up going All-State in Rhode Island. I only played for two years my junior and senior year, and I was All-State my senior year. We lost again in the semi finals of

Andrew Rodgers who knows basketball and he became the head coach for about two or three years. His name should be in the history books. After he stepped down I took over as the head coach.

In terms of assistant coaches after that, there weren't many. I had Josh Sun at one point who was a former Balls captain. Dorian Epps was also an assistant coach, along with Brandon Morris, though Brandon wasn't a RISD guy. He got introduced to me by the old director of CSI, Erika Paradis. He had worked in Res Life or something and Erika knew he liked basketball and was interested in coaching.

RS

What was your experience with the game of basketball before you came to MassArt and then eventually joined RISD?

BO

Man, basketball has been a big part of my life since I was a kid. I was kind of a reluctant athlete when I was younger, my entire family is full of athletes. The town I grew up in really prioritizes sports and athletes, especially amongst the boys. I grew up in the '90s, pretty much in East Providence. Sports was everything, dude. I was an artist, I love to draw, I love to just be in my room drawing and be left alone. But it wasn't even an option, I was kind of forced to play sports here and there.

I did have some natural athleticism, and I'm tall, but I was also a little bit goofy and gangly too. I really just wanted to draw, but I always played some sports, especially basketball. It was so accessible and easy. It was everywhere. We're lucky to be on the East Coast, it's a basketball culture. Basketball games happened every day. You could just walk to a park and play. I had a hoop at my house too, and I would drag it out or our driveway to the street so that I would have a flat spot to play. People would come by and play. We played games at my crib like two on two, three on three, and stuff like that.

the state championship, we should have won. We lost to Hendricken, but that kind of got me back into playing organized sports a little bit.

I was always playing basketball at that time, just doing pick up. And then when I left high school, this is when it really took off. That's when I really started balling hard. When I got to MassArt, I saw they actually had their own court, which was amazing. Like, come on, RISD needs to have one. I was also playing on the street. I started to play a lot more basketball once I got into early college, and I never stopped. I think I have

► Byron being introduced before a game against Cooper Union. April 4, 2012

a really solid balance of street ball and organized ball. I played a ton of street basketball, and it's different in so many ways, dude, but mostly it's like the grittiness and the toughness. You're not going to go to a court and take over and run that shit. If you're soft, it's just not happening.

I feel like most people learn most of their skills and were really good at basketball in high school, but I was way better when I was 25 than when I was when I was 17. I basically just continued to play basketball at least once a week for forever, you know, up until now, and I'm starting to slow down slightly now. But even now, I play once a week, just about and I still dominate. It's hard to quit playing. I wanted to retire, bro, after watching Jayson Tatum



go down, Damian Lillard go down, Haliburton go down, all in the same playoffs with an injury that I'm scared shitless of. Like I said, I tore my ACL. I had a second surgery on that same knee in 2019 for a meniscus tear. I have a torn labrum. I had shoulder surgery. I've come back from three major surgeries, and, man, I do not want to do it again. So I'm really considering phasing out basketball, because no matter what, dude, it's just a sport that just has a higher level of danger, especially with your joints, than other physical activity.

RS

I think that's so interesting to hear about that balance between the sport and the art and deciding which is more important to you, especially as those two worlds were never designed to be compatible with one another.

BO

Exactly, a perfect example of that is today: I had planned to play basketball today after this, and I chose to drop out because I lifted yesterday and did lower body and my legs are sore. When you get to my age, I just turned 39 bro, the soreness lasts way longer, and it's so much harder to get through. The other reason I dropped out is because I'm super in my flow right now with my book. The last few days, I've been going crazy writing and drawing, and I don't want to mess up that flow. I know for a fact, if I stay here today, all day, and just work, I'm going to produce some good stuff. That's that balance you're talking about and deciding as you age to prioritize one over the other.

I've spent so much of my life playing basketball, I want to just focus a little bit more on my art now.

RS

When did you first become aware of the RISD Balls, and what drew you to join the team once you transferred?



▼ Byron Olson (right) in a game against Sarah Lawrence. January 24, 2012



***Even if you smoke all day and
drink all night and sit the rest of
the time, you know you need that
little extra something, and
playing basketball is it.***



***– Coach Byron
Olson 12 IL***



BO

I knew about the Balls before I went to RISD. It was part of the reason I wanted to go to RISD. This is what I tried to make people understand when I was the Athletic Director when I was there. Students actually want to come to this school because of these sports teams, believe it or not. It's a small group, granted, but if you're interested in basketball and art, you want to go to a school that has both of those things. I heard about the Balls specifically through my guy, Andrew Gonzalez. I went to MassArt, went through almost two and a half years of it, and then dropped out and took a half a year off before I even went to RISD. Andrew is about two years older than me and he had gone through RISD and played with Joe Gebbia on that early team, and that's when I first heard about it. He's also from East Providence. He's one of the very few other artists to come out of Riverside, especially one of the only athlete artists.

I grew up in East Providence and Providence, and would drive by RISD, and people would tell you about it, and you'd hear about it, and it was the only reason I knew art schools existed. At that time, I didn't even know how much prestige RISD really had in terms of where it was on the scale of art schools.

What drew me to joining the Balls was after I had

officially dropped out of MassArt, I was still playing on the team because they needed ballers. Nobody gave a shit. So I played on the team, and we were coming down to play RISD. And we came down and beat RISD. After the game, Don Morton, the Director of CSI at the time, came up to me and I told him I was thinking of transferring to RISD and he told me to do it. So I came down and whooped on everybody, and then I was their teammate the following fall.

RS

Fast forwarding a little bit, in November of 2013 the Balls finally beat their big art school rival, Cooper Union, for the first time since they first face in 2002. What did it mean to you and the team as a whole to finally do that?

BO

That was incredible. That was one of the best, maybe the best, coaching experience of my life. That team was a special team, man. There's been a few really special teams, but that team was super special for a few reasons. Our core had come in all together as freshmen and stayed on till seniors. The core of the team was there for four years, and I was able to develop them right, and they were also really

▲ Byron Olson (center) in a huddle with Bill Miller (left) during a game against Pratt. February 5, 2010

solid basketball players. I had shooters, I had big men, and I had a really solid point guard in Conner Griffith. That team alone could have maybe beat Cooper. Cooper was always really solid.

The reason? They recruited illegally. You're not supposed to recruit when you're not even a part of the NCAA or a Division III team. Cooper Union had a page on a basketball recruitment website where you could go and sign up to be recruited by them. They offered free tuition to basketball recruits and they would bring in a few players every year who were legitimate basketball players in high school.

Like I said, our team had a great foundational core, and then you sprinkle in the key of it all: RaMell Ross. RaMell Ross is the best player to ever play for RISD. Not even close, bro. He's filthy. I consider myself one of those top players. I know him personally, he lives just across the street from me. He teaches at Brown too. He was nominated for an Oscar. It's fucking crazy. I saw a video of him being interviewed by Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt interviewed him about the movie!

RaMell was a grad student at that time, and I think he came to the tryout earlier in the year, and I was like "bro, yeah, you made the team". He's 6'5" or 6'6", shooting guard. Knock down shooter, all the skill, all the handles. He played at Georgetown University during undergrad.

He was on the team, but he came basically whenever the hell he wanted. It was that type of thing. He never came to practice. We'd always be hitting him up "Yo, come to practice like we want you, we need you". I think he came to two or three practices the whole season, and then came to a few games, and one of them was that Cooper Union game. He helped us big time.

Getting RISD that win after playing for three years, losing to this team, was great. I don't like to lose. We played them twice a year, six times as a player. To finally get that dub, even as a coach, it was just so great. The other thing about them bro, they were dirty, at least when I played. They would do the most cheap bullshit, like cheap shots all the time. They had this guy, Dean Baker, who was essentially like their athletic director, I think, but he would always be at the basketball games. He would come to RISD, and the guy would be trying to give halftime speeches. He was just one of those dudes who just wanted all the attention as often as possible. He thought he was solely responsible for making Cooper Union athletics what it was, and I'm

sure he was a big part of that, and I honestly kind of like the guy, but you could tell he

► Screenshots from a video taken following the final whistle in the Balls first victory of Cooper Union. November 22, 2013



was one of those dudes who had a lot of hubris. He thought he was really the shit, and in some ways he was. The guys on the Balls team and stuff we would clown on him so hard because he was also a lot older. He had this vibe about him. He was so New York.

RS

I know that the Balls won the NASBI tournament in February 2014. Do you know how that tournament came to be? What was it like bringing RISD an actual trophy back to campus?

BO

I was part of the formation of the NASBI. It was RISD, Cooper Union, and the New School doing most of the organizing. And MassArt being MassArt just got kind of brought in. It was always the plan to have two New England schools, two New York schools, and have it be a little four team tournament with single elimination, just to act like some kind of end of season championship. That's the thing I was really missing as a player. We played a solid regular season in those days where we would play around 12 games. It felt like a pretty full season for an art school basketball team.

But always after that final game I was like "fuck, we need some sort of playoff". We're flowing finally, as a team, it took all year. We have all this chemistry, I want to play in the playoffs. I remember chatting with Dean Baker about that, and I can't remember this woman's name from the New School who was



RS

I've noticed in some of the old photos and videos from like the early 2010's when you were on the team and then also coaching that it seemed like you guys had the best student attendance. I saw so many photos of fans dressing up, cheering on the team, and so on. How was the team and its games promoted around campus?

BO

I'm going to be super honest, I wasn't great at promoting. I was just the guy who showed up and played. But here's the key, the reputation of the team at that time was really popular and popping. They did funny shit, bro. That is the key, that's what RISD students respond to. That's the whole idea of this team. The shit needs to be funny, the promotion needs to be funny, and then the leaders of the team are actually being out there around RISD.

Guys like Henry Freel and Toussaint Wallace. These guys were popular dudes on campus, and I think they brought in a lot of fan attendance. But here's the thing that they did, bro, they were out there on campus acting a fool with their Balls jerseys on, interest, like we had multiple times, where they used to do just like hot during the winter, like hot chocolate giveaway. The promo flyers at that time were completely out of pocket. It was just so funny, but so

◀ Byron poses with the NASBI trophy and an autographed basketball in the Memorial Hall Tap Room space. April 19, 2014

like their athletic director at the time, but I remember chatting to her about that, because she'd be at the games too. We decided it would be either in New York or New England, and that would switch off each year.

That second year, MassArt took on the role of being the host, and that's why we had the gym in Boston for the tourney. That first year, Cooper Union hosted it in their typical gym, which is this terrible, tiny, little gym. I hated it in New York City. Then the third year it was supposed to go back to the New School, and then after that RISD would host it. I think that's where it ended, the year we were supposed to host it, which would have been the fourth year. I don't remember why this happened. It took a lot of coordinating between the schools. But Don Morton left in the middle of it, so that made things more difficult. But anyways, that's how it started.

We just wanted a trophy to pass back and forth every year for control. It ended up being we made a new one each year, and that's why we still have that one. Thank God we didn't. We'd have to give that up. It's our only trophy ever. I would love to see the tournament come back.

out of pocket that it would never fly these days. I remember one with Henry with his back turned to camera, hands on hips, head craned up, with two girls on their knees in front of him. There were giant cum splurges all over the fucking poster. It said "are you coming?" Just seeing that poster of Henry getting domed up by two people, I could not believe we were posting this around campus, dude.

The other thing too, was the after party vibes. Back in my day, and even in the days when I was coaching afterwards, there were lots of after parties that were already established before the game, so students knew they were going to the game, and then also going to party after.

The culture is always going to be a little bit hit or miss. It's just like players coming to RISD, you never know. Certain years, there's going to be really, really good basketball players. Other years, not so much. Some years there's going to be a lot of fans who are really drawn to something that, like the Balls offer,



▲ Byron coaching the team in a game against Public Safety. May 13, 2022

▶ A photo after Byron's last game as coach. March 24, 2023

and then other years, not so much. So I feel like some of it's out of your control a bit, but I do think—and I've been saying this to you guys since I was a coach—the more work you guys put in to promote this shit and get out there as humans, the better the club will do. Our population does not give a shit if you can hit a little fade away shot, they don't even know what that is. They just see the ball go in, or they see the ball miss. 98% of people at RISD don't care about the game, they care about the individuals, the players.

We took team photos every year too. We took individual photos as part of the promotion. Each person would get their own poster that would go up talking a little bit about who they are or a post on Instagram.

RS

As someone who's been involved with the team as long as you have, I feel like you have seen much of the evolution of the team and the RISD community firsthand. What patterns do you see forming with the team year after year and what led to its successes as well as its failures? After leaving the team, what has it come to mean to you?

BO

If you're on the team I think you have to love basketball, at least to some extent, since you're devoting so much time outside of your studio time. The people on the team enjoy balance in their life. We don't have that physical outlet in our work. Some people might be glass blowers or something, but for the most part a lot of us are sitting down, not moving our asses for way too long. Students who try out for the Balls are searching for balance, people who are more health conscious than others.



Even if you smoke all day and drink all night and sit the rest of the time, you know you need that little extra something, and playing basketball is it.

Basketball is like a spiritual thing for me. It's like going to church. I don't go to church anymore, though I was raised Catholic. I'm an atheist, but bro, when I'm playing basketball, it's like I'm at church. Nothing else matters. Everything else washes away. I'm just focused on this thing and the grace and the unpredictability and all the things that go into playing basketball.

Having that outlet while I was at RISD was massively important for me to stay balanced and get through the difficult times when I was like, "I don't want to do this shit. I don't want to draw anymore". Having that practice to go to on Tuesday nights and wash everything away was like a brain reset for me. Like I said, I was a reluctant athlete when

I was younger. People would almost drag me out there to play. I wanted to stay inside and play video games. I wanted to stay inside and draw. My cousins and friends would drag me out there to play. I'm so glad that they did, because eventually basketball became a thing I never dread doing.

There's moments I get really stressed out on basketball, but it's that good stress. It's a way to feel it. As soon as the game ends, win or lose, the stress is gone.

I think the common theme to successful RISD basketball teams is a great captain. Joe Gebbia said it himself when he wanted we had the meeting and he wanted to create the athletic director position. He was like, "I think the Balls being successful relies

on three things: a great captain, a great coach and a great athletic director". I think he's right, but it starts with the captain. If that captain isn't there, that captain who's really dedicated to it, willing to put in a little extra work, willing to put himself or herself out there in the RISD community, as a RISD basketball player, then the team will fail. The years that we had amazing captains, we had really good basketball years, not always with wins and losses, but in terms of attendance and popularity. Wheeler would call us telling us that the gym was over capacity, students would show up in costumes doing crazy stuff.

You got to love basketball, and you got to love the RISD community, your peers, the people you're at school with, and be willing to put in the little extra

work. On top of that you have to galvanize the team around you and spread that fearlessness of getting the job done.

If you think about it, basketball itself is kind of a chaotic game. It's very free flowing. There's grace to it too, especially with guys who are really good. But you ever seen basketball with people who are not? It's fucking chaos, dude, right? I feel the same way about hockey too. I feel like there's a reason those two sports have been the sports at RISD that have lived on for so long. Chaos.

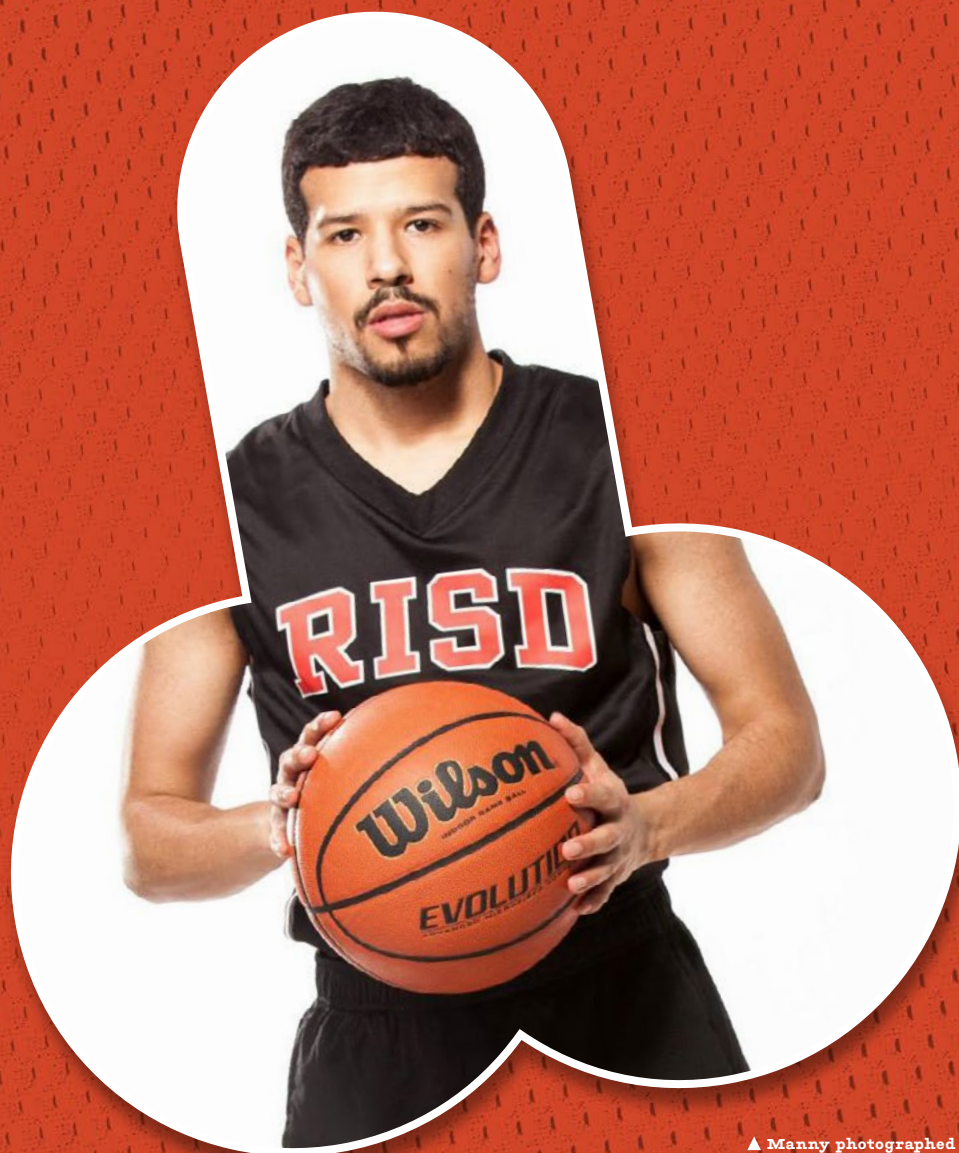


► Byron shooting around with Dorian Epps (left) before a Balls Alumni game. January 14, 2023

▼ Byron hyped during a Balls on Balls scrimmage. October 22, 2022



◀ Byron during a game against Landmark College. November 5, 2022



▲ Manny photographed by Rob Chron. February 2014

An interview with...

Manny Hernandez 16 GD

Manny still lives in Providence today, and is one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the team you will meet. He is a regular at the team's annual Balls alumni games, and throughout his own time at RISD, he made numerous projects centered around the team from elaborate game posters to custom calendars. During the summer of 2025 I met Manny at Antonio's Pizza on Thayer Street, a classic and well remembered restaurant by anyone who has gone to school around College Hill over the last few decades. Over a couple slices Manny shared with me his memories of the team, and I often found myself not needing to look at the notes I prepared, as he was more than eager to share every moment he enjoyed. I feel a kind of kinship with Manny as a Graphic Design student/Balls player, so it only made sense to hear his own design perspective on the team's legacy.

RYAN SCOTT

What years were you involved with the team?

MANNY HERNANDEZ

I got to RISD in 2013 and I played on the team all the way through graduation in 2016.

RS

What was your experience with basketball before you came to RISD?

MH

I used to play street ball all the time, all day, every day. The RISD Balls were the first "under the whistle" games I've ever played. I never played organized ball before that.

RS

When did you first hear about the Balls?

MH

Right when I came to RISD. There was an outdoor club Block Party for student clubs on Benefit Street. They had a basketball hoop set up and were trying to recruit people. I took a few shots and said I really wanted to play and they told me "you're gonna play". It was cool, but I obviously still had to formally try out.

RS

How was it transitioning from street ball to more organized ball? Although I guess you could say the Balls themselves aren't always organized.

MH

The pace of the game is different. There were a lot of basketball IQ things that I didn't know about. A lot of people that I used to play street ball with back in Philly also played organized ball, but they didn't teach me that because it doesn't apply, right?

For example: how to get fouls. That's not something in street ball that you're trying to get. I never tried to fake contact to get a foul shot, so as soon as I got to the line for the first time and I made my two shots, I'm like "Oh, we're playing chess not checkers anymore".

RS

As a fellow RISD graphic designer, I'm interested in the posters you made for the team during your time on the Balls. When did that begin, who approached you about that, and also, what was it like designing in a space with no rules whatsoever versus your more structured design studio work?

MH

So I think that Byron, my coach, and some of the guys saw some of my poster work, and they told me they'd be interested in seeing what I could do for the team. I definitely didn't hesitate because poster design was something that I was really passionate about. I was a huge fan of Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell's work and I wanted to implement that wherever I could. And so this became the perfect opportunity where there's no rules, you make up the prompt, and you can do whatever you want. It needed that kind of freedom and I think it shows in the final product. I took from what I learned in Tom's studio and started from collages. That was kind of the base for those posters.

I think that a lot of the work I've gotten afterward stemmed from the Balls posters. People would see my portfolios and point right to those ones and say "Alright, tell me about those".

RS

Because it said "Balls"?

MH

No, it was because of how dynamic they

▼ Poster designed by Manny for a game against Kings College. February 14, 2015

RS

Are you talking about the "Cooper Union you will pay" posters? I didn't think those were that crazy.

MH

That's not the poster that was taken down.

For some background on that one actually.

▼ Cooper Union's response to Manny's "Dear Cooper Union" poster series. February 2016

That year was the first year that Cooper Union stopped being a tuition-free school. I think leadership changed along with other

stuff, and there was a big division within the school happening, or at least that's what my friend there, Sedrick Chisom, told me. He told me the story about how they're people coming in after the change and they're mad at people like him since he had a "freebie" and they didn't. There was a lot of tension. So that poster became a nod to that, almost saying "Haha, you have to pay now", which is kind of silly and immature.

But the one I had to take down said something like "Dear Cooper Union, I hate your stinking guts". It wasn't crazy, but the word "hate" was in it, so some people found it offensive. Byron was the one who told me personally to take it down since people were talking about it, and I was like "Really? Out of everything we've made? It's a reference to The Little Rascals".

But guess what? Word got to Joe Gebbia, and he loved it. He wanted to keep it up. Later Byron asked if I had taken it down and I told him no. He said "Don't. Joe loves it."

RS

Did you ever show this work to professors like Nancy and Tom, and what were their reactions?

MH

What's funny is that I did a poster for the last game of the year against MassArt. It's an explosive design and says "Go wild" on it. I did that design while I was in Tom's poster making class. We had a project coming up and I decided to do that as the prompt. So every week he would critique. He'd ask "How can we push it more? Push this off the edge more". By the end he was like "It's perfect".

RS

Considering the era you played on the Balls, that was when they won the first NASBI. You mentioned before that you designed the logo for the tournament. What was the process like for that, both from the design side and the play on the court?

MH

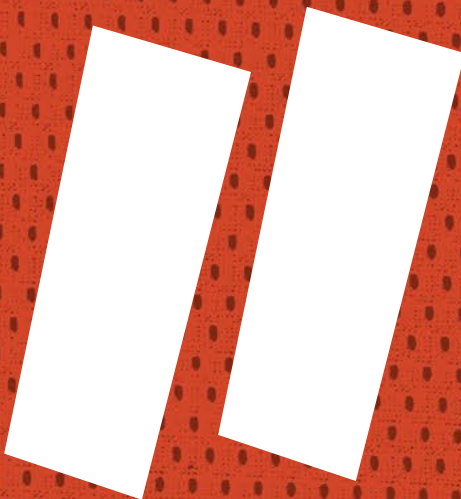
It was amazing. Again, it started with Byron reaching out to me, who I'll call the client. Some of these requests were kind of crazy. He told me that there was an opportunity for me to make a logo and design some shirts, but he said this near the end of the week and he needed this by the weekend. So that night I created it. I think RISD students work well under pressure, and sometimes our best work comes out of that. And then winning was amazing. I remember everybody that was there, it was a great experience.





***The RISD Balls were my outlet. I
was away from all of the things
that were happening at RISD and
I could unwind.***

***– Manny Hernandez
16 GD***



RS

What was the gametime environment and attendance like? What did students do at games?

MH

Tim Plummer was the voice of our team. He was our announcer along with another guy named Adam. They had a great dynamic.

And the games were popular. I don't want to take credit for the posters, but I remember Byron telling me that there was a problem with student attendance at games and we weren't promoting the games that well.

Eventually the fans came back. They would make big heads of us and hold them up during games. They'd scream our names. My girlfriend at the time, who's now my wife, used to attend all of the games, every single one, and so the team knew her well. Games were always loud with a lot of energy. I loved playing at home. Playing away felt like playing at some recreation center by comparison, all you hear is us and the whistle.

RS

Once you graduated RISD, did you continue playing? I was interested to hear if your time as player and designer influenced your work in the future, either literally through your design approach or your collaborative skills?

MH

I still play basketball. I'm trying to keep up because my weight fluctuates and I understand what I have to do to keep it right, so I try to stay active. I recently found a local league I play in on Saturday mornings. I try to play at least once every two weeks. Once a week would be ideal, but that doesn't happen because of how busy things get with my kids and stuff.

But like I said before, after RISD the pieces that people really point to in my portfolio are my posters for the Balls. Even when I show people my professional work and the things I've done for clients like National Geographic, they're like "Yeah, cool, but what about those posters?"

RS

What did the team mean to you during your time at RISD?

MH

The RISD Balls were my outlet. When I needed time alone, I'd go into practice an hour early, because I knew that's when they opened the door, and I would just go in and shoot for an hour before anybody else came. That was my alone time, and that time was



▲ A Balls calendar designed by Manny. c. 2014

sacred to me. I can meditate, I can pray, I can be by myself. I was away from all of the things that were happening at RISD and I could unwind.

Soon people started catching on to that, and they're like "Wait, you're sweating. How many shots did you put up already?"

I love my teammates, they were so lovable. Mike Moyal was a guy I had a lot of ups and downs with. Mike was very competitive, just as much as I was. I grew up in the inner city of Philadelphia, and sometimes I would take things the wrong way when I shouldn't have. But Mike was just innocently competitive, and I thought he had something against me. I remember he wanted to play me once, one on one. We would talk trash, and I'd tell him "I'll leave you with zero", meaning I'm not gonna let him score a single point, and he was like "What?"

So we played, and I beat him. After that I told him that I didn't want to play with him anymore. It wasn't anything personal, I just didn't want to mess up our relationship. He just wanted to get better, but he didn't tell me that at the time. He wanted to play a shooting game, and I said alright because that's not as physical. Afterward I sat down with him, and I told him "I thought you didn't like me?" because of how competitive he was. But he said "No, man, it's the opposite. I wanted to play with you more but you thought of me a certain way". So now, whenever there's an alumni game or something like that, he's the first person I call.

There was no reason to think like that back then, we were kids. That was my immature side showing, when I thought everybody was out to get me, but it just wasn't true.

Another guy was Oliver Song, he ended up being my roommate later. We had a lot of great times during Balls practice. I made a lot of friends on the team, and a lot of these people later ended up in my wedding.

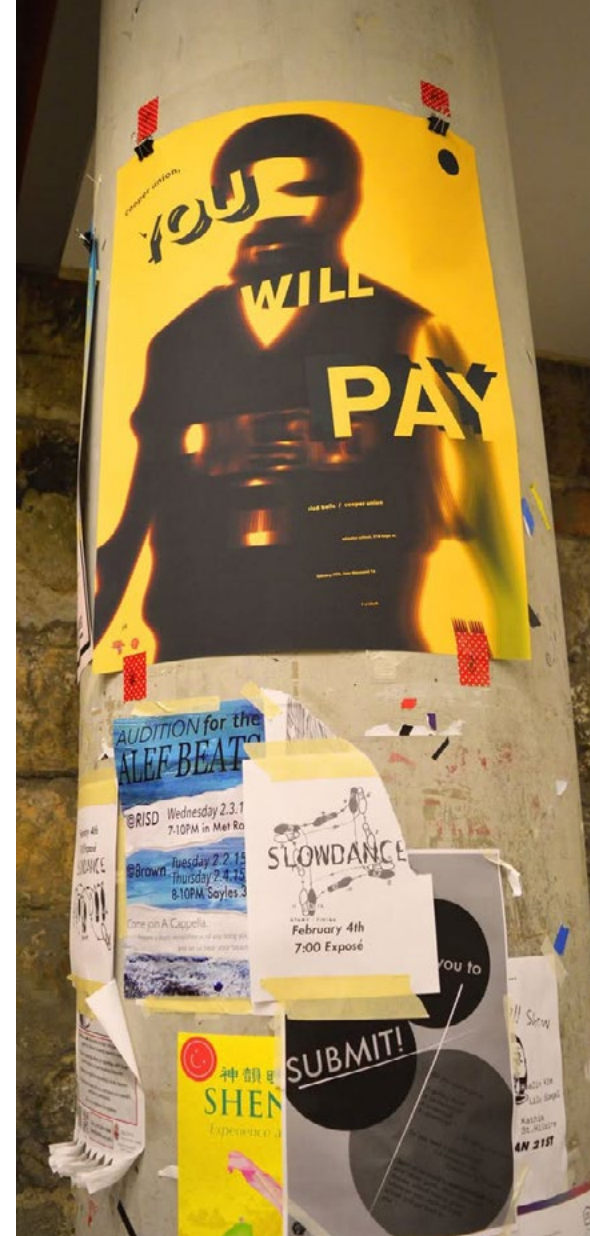
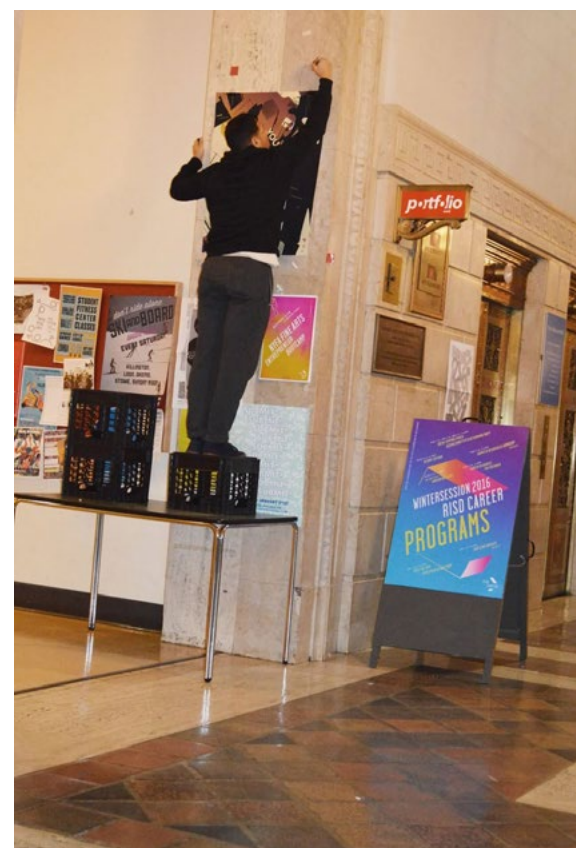
I really loved Byron as our coach. He really tried

his best to get us all involved and to make the team a safe space for us as students.

One of the best parts of RISD was the RISD Balls. Because of the people, because of the environment, and because of the games. After games you'd talk to people you didn't know from the audience who came out to watch you play, or if you're out in the cafeteria someone would say "Hey, you play for the Balls, right?" It was the best thing for me as someone who came in as a transfer student. I was a part of a small number of transfer students, including Mike Moyal, so it was hard for me to make friends at first. But basketball brought us all together.

●●

▼▶ Manny hanging his "Cooper Union, You Will Pay" posters. February 2016



► A poster Manny made for a poster design course taught by Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell. February 27, 2015





▲ Rosanne at a Balls vs Faculty game. October 10, 2015

An interview with...

President Emerita Rosanne Somerson 76 ID

After graduating from the Industrial Design department in 1976, Rosanne would later return to RISD in 1985 as a professor and would go on to found the school's Furniture Design department in 1995. After serving as an interim from 2014 to 2015, Rosanne would become RISD's 17th President and retire in 2021. Much like Roger Mandle, RISD's 15th President, Rosanne was and still is a major supporter of the team, having both attended and participated in games. Today, a picture of her with Balls alumni hangs in the Student Fitness Center, and without the public support of the team and athletics overall at RISD by institutional leaders like her, it is unlikely that the Balls would have the legacy that they do.

RYAN SCOTT

During your time as a student at RISD in the 1970s what was the athletics culture like? Did sports like basketball have any presence or popularity among the student body that you're aware of?

ROSANNE SOMERSON

I would say very little presence. It was a school. The Nads were there. There was hockey, but I don't think there was any kind of formal basketball at that point, not that I was aware of anyway.

RYAN

When you returned to RISD in the 1980s as a professor and later as head of the Furniture Design department, had anything changed about that athletic culture?

ROSANNE

I think in general, students were more interested in physical activity and in keeping healthy. There was an emerging cycling situation which I was interested in, because I used to cycle quite a bit.

I became more aware of basketball when the Balls started, and as a faculty member, we formed a faculty team to challenge the balls. We called ourselves "the Brass". We had really cool uniforms. They were awesome. We also had socks designed

by Josh Owen, who went on to become a very well known designer and professor. Roger Mandle was president at that time, and so he came to our game and was very supportive. On a personal note, I hadn't really played basketball before, so I started four months before the game. I started going to the YMCA every Sunday and learning how to play. I found someone there who would teach me how to play basketball. So I kind of trained up before the game.

We only ever played in one game, but we had cheerleaders, we had a whole thing planned. It was a well attended game, and the balls had probably 29 students playing on the team, so they were able to sub out people pretty quickly. I think we had one or two extra. The youngest people were probably in their 40s, so we were pretty beat by the end of the game. We lost incredibly. I think it was around 68-11. But it was really fun, and it was a nice way to support the team.

RYAN

Do you have any experience playing organized sports, either in your youth or high school?

ROSANNE

I did dance and I cycled most of my younger years, but not in a team way. I was never on an organized team. And actually, when I said I was training at the YMCA for the basketball game, my daughter was in middle school, and she had this wonderful coach. He was just an incredibly great teacher with the kids. I approached him one day and said, "Would you consider training me? I have to be in a game I don't know how to play. Would you consider training me for three months?" He agreed, and I met him at the gym every Sunday afternoon and just played one on one.

By the end of the three months, I was decent, but when I got into the game with the RISD students, I was terrible. They were just so much faster when you have a whole team around. I was one on one with this guy who was probably being very gentle with me, but you know, I was shooting baskets, I was dribbling, I was blocking, I was doing all this stuff. Then when I actually got onto the court, I froze. I didn't do very well, so it made me respect what the students and other faculty were doing.

We had one faculty player, Peter Dean, who had been in the Olympics. He was very tall, about 6'7", and in his younger years he had been an Olympic sailor and won a bronze medal at the 1972 games. But since he was so tall, he got totally beat up by the students. His wife told me that she saw him later that day, and he was just bruises from head to toe.

So it was kind of rough on us all folks but at least we all survived without major injuries.

RYAN

Moving forward to your time as president of RISD, what was your relationship with your administration to club teams like the Balls? Did you attend many games?

ROSANNE

I tried to attend as many Balls games as I could, and I didn't get to some of the ones that were out of town, like at Cooper Union. There were also sometimes alumni games, and I would try and go to those.

I did cycle a couple of times with the cycling club, and bought the kits for them. They were designing fantastic cycling kits. I don't know if they're still doing that, but I did support the cycling team. I wasn't as involved in hockey.

I really think fitness is important for the mind as much as the body. And so I started a program called "Workout With the President", and I got somebody from a local training gym to come once a week and train with the students. At the beginning there were maybe eighteen students, and at the end like six or seven or eight. [laughs] But it was really fun demonstrating the importance of how your body and your mind are connected in staying in shape. As a president, it was a bit of a priority.

RYAN

I know there was a photo in the fitness center of you with some Balls players. I believe it's from an alumni game around 2015. Could you tell me any more about that time and the story behind that?

ROSANNE

That was during Alumni Weekend, and I wanted to see the game. There were a lot of former students that I knew, and so I just went in and cheered them on. It was super fun. I love the fact that the teams were not gendered, that there was a sense of anyone who wanted to play was welcome. And there were some pretty good athletes there, considering that we're not a school that recruits athletes. [Laughs]

But having a physical outlet is a really important part of an artist's creative practice. And I know, for me, when I'm trying to design something tricky, I often go for a walk or a bike ride. I find that if my body's moving, my brain moves differently. I was really supportive of the efforts of students. Plus, the pace at RISD is so grueling that it's just really important to take care of yourself. I was always

trying to make sure that students were eating and sleeping well.

We would have late night breakfast for the students, and I would help and serve just to demonstrate the importance of looking after your body as part of the creative practice. Students at RISD don't separate mind and body. A lot of the knowledge that they're getting is through their hands. We always looked at making as a really intellectual practice, and I think it's the similar thing about exercise, that it's part of what fuels your well being, but also your intellect.

RYAN

That's great to hear. During my research, I've been looking through old student publications, and there's a lot of stuff from the 1980s when there wasn't a developed athletic program, and a lot of students were writing about how they need this side of the student culture for the same reason; thinking about it as an outlet for not just exercise but the mind and body. There was one student that wrote about how your experiences playing games could even inspire your work in the studio.

ROSANNE

Exactly. Overcoming obstacles is a part of what training teaches you; feeling frustrated in the game, and then seeing how you can kind of pull it off. Those are all things that happen in the studio as well. So there's a lot of correlation. If you're living fully, it resonates in everything that you do. You can't be expected to be an ideation machine. You need pause times and different kinds of outlets. I always found in my teaching, but also in my own studio practice, that having time when you're doing something physical is a great time to generate new ideas or to solve problems that you haven't been able to solve just sitting in your workspace.

RYAN

I agree. During your time as the president of RISD, the Balls won the first annual New England Art School Basketball Invitational (NASBI) tournament and they brought home a trophy that's still displayed in the fitness center. How did the school celebrate this major, and possibly only, athletic championship that we have?

ROSANNE

[Laughs] Quite honestly, I think it was more celebrated by the students and in the Student Activities area. We should have done more, because it was a moment for RISD. I know that we did publicize some of the cycling team members who went on

to win big championships as well. They became racers. I think there are three of them that I can remember that became nationally acclaimed racers. I know there was publicity about that in some of the RISD press, but for some reason, I don't think that Balls' championship got the billing that it should have. It was such an accomplishment for us.

RYAN

Did the RISD Balls ever come up in conversation with other members of RISD administration or even leaders of other colleges?

ROSANNE

Yeah, it did come up. It came up when I would go to president's conferences. Unfortunately, the naming of Scrotie came up more than anything. I was at a seminar at Harvard, and they were doing a thing about the importance of school mascots, and someone actually brought up Scrotie as one of the most offensive ones. I had a RISD name tag on as a representative, and people were coming up to me after asking "how can you put up with this?"

There were a lot of parents that were upset about the names of the teams and were conservative like that. My view was always that these were student run organizations. We weren't going to censor them. Art in general can be controversial, and that's okay. So I was not into censorship or changing any of that, but I don't think that the win records of the teams were, as noted around the national athletics communities as the names of the teams and our mascot.

RYAN

I know recent RISD leadership and the RISD store have kind of moved away from Scrotie and the Balls, including the end of selling club team merch in the school store. I wanted to hear maybe your opinion on that movement and that decision.

ROSANNE

I respect the fact that it is something that offends some people, either through spiritual beliefs or cultural beliefs. There were a lot of students who were feminists who felt that it was offensive to them, and I respect all that. My position anyway was to really leave it in the hands of the students, and that I was always there to support the students and their interests. If they were going to name a team something that was offensive, they needed to be the spokespersons for understanding why it's offensive and how to deal with it and navigate that in their own lives.



▲► Rosanne and Joe at a Balls vs Faculty game. October 10, 2015



I think the last thing I would want to do as president is infantilize the students' own capacity to deal with conflict. So I felt like it was a learning experience for them, wherever they were on the opinion meter.

RYAN

Have there moments of meaningful impact on campus morale, community engagement and school spirit by the RISD Balls that wouldn't have been possible otherwise?

ROSANNE

Absolutely. So much contemporary practice involves teams. I'm doing a big project now, and I have a team that I'm on and that I'm working with, and I think that some of the actual developmental skills that students learn by participating on a team and thinking about setting something up for someone else, or being set up by someone else, or just cooperative work is really valuable in the professional world as an artist or designer. Besides an outlet for activity there is this other learning situation which is about understanding how to navigate a team and how to be thinking about the end result and not just as an individual. That understanding has grown as professions have become more and more collaborative in their nature.

I think art and design practice has changed a lot since the 1980s, because no one can know everything that you need to know to get work made or done. There are people now that are really specialized in digital work. There are people that are more three dimensional. There are people that are really good about narrative pieces. There are all these pieces that have to come together to make something successful in a professional practice way, and the teams are a great way to learn those interactive and collaborative skills.

We were competitive with other schools, certainly with Cooper. That was our kind of big rival. But there was so much pride in coming together against another school that really solidified people on the team, and they became important to each other. I never got the sense that there were people on the team competing with each other to be the best. They saw it as a total RISD thing, and not as their big star moment.

RYAN

As somebody who's played on the basketball team for the past three years. Yeah, I think it's a good thing we never really have any ego troubles, because it's not like we're getting scouted by the NBA or anything. [Laughs] We know it's the end of

the line. We know this is kind of the last chance we get to play on an organized team.

ROSANNE

Exactly. You're not going to be sponsored by any brand, you're going to make the brand.

RYAN

I was wondering if you have any other favorite stories or memories involving the team, either on or off the court?

ROSANNE

Ooh, that's a tough one. I used to enjoy going and watching some of the training that went on up at the Wheeler Gym, just to encourage students and let them know there's so many lessons you can learn from playing a sport with a group of people. I felt like, as my role as a faculty member and administrator, that I was there to encourage people's growth, right? It was a way to interact with students that I wouldn't normally get to see. I loved that sense of socializing with students in a relaxed way around a game was very different from other interactions that I had with students. I really looked forward to those interactions.

RYAN

Do you own any Balls merch or memorabilia?

ROSANNE

My dog has some Balls merch, and I still have my "Brass" shirt with my name on the back that I wore at the game. I saved that since it was very special to me. I gave Balls merch as gifts to friends and family.

RYAN

Since you've been at RISD for so much of the team's existence, what do you believe are its strengths and weaknesses as an organization?

ROSANNE

The hardest part for our students is just the time commitment because the studio work is so intense and the teams have to adjust around crit time and crunch time, etc, but it's probably when you need it the most is when you're on a deadline, when you need that outlet the most. In retrospect now, being away from RISD for a little while, I think the teams could have used more support. Because they came out of students, the administration saw them as sort of grassroots things. There was some financial support, but I think we could have made the students feel our pride more overtly than we did in the end.

There were some very dedicated faculty who were really involved in supporting the students. When we played in that game, Roger Mandle was incredibly proud of the teams and just loved the whole experience. It was also a chance for some of the faculty to bring their family to see the game. It gave a sense for students, who were away from their families, a nice feeling to sort of feel part of a family in a way that they were missing. I don't have any standout memories that were negative or positive, but my overall feeling was real pride in just seeing the students dedication and their growth and success in whatever level it came.

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▼► The late RISD President Roger Mandle photographed for the program for the first Balls Alumni Game. October 2003





***My position was to really leave
it in the hands of the students, I
was always there to support the
students and their interests.***

***– President Emerita
Rosanne Somerson
76 ID***





▲ Sarah photographed for the Center for Student Involvement (CSI). c. 2023

An interview with...

Sarah Knarr

Sarah Knarr is the current Director of the Center for Student Involvement (CSI) at RISD. Though she has not that many years of experience with the Balls, I still wanted to speak with her and learn more about how club teams at RISD are structured, as it can sometimes be difficult to explain to someone not within the RISD bubble. It was interesting to learn how sports teams at RISD have been forced to operate within the same structures intended for more basic organizations, but hopefully in the coming years more will be done to separate Crochet Club or Film Club from the basketball, hockey, and other team sports at the school.

RYAN SCOTT

So how long have you been working here at RISD?

SARAH KNARR

I'm the Director for the Center for Student Involvement at RISD, and I've been here for four years. My anniversary is coming up.

RS

What was your first exposure to the RISD Balls team?

SK

When you first start any job, you inherit the portfolio and realize what you're going to be overseeing. I'm local. I grew up in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. I knew RISD my whole life, I used to go to the museum all the time. I didn't actually know they had sports which is part of the reason we made those "RISD has sports" hats. We're trying to bring attention to them and that speaks to a larger issue in conversation.

When I started here, I got my portfolio of work, and that included the athletic teams. I got briefed on the naming conventions, and that was really interesting because I thought it was really funny, to be honest. Then I learned some of the nuances at an administrative level that happen. I'm really

passionate about them being student led and named, as long as they're not causing harm within our community. Over the years I have learned there are vastly different opinions across the institution about the names. Shortly after I started, a graduate student planned a class that was on a mission to rename the teams and create a new mascot to replace Scrotie.

There were protests against the class, demanding that it can't happen. That was a really early exposure to the community's passion.

RS

Were there any other places that you encountered resistance to the Balls as a team? If it was brought during meetings or casual conversation, how did you react and what was the general administrative opinion?

SK

I don't know how many or who doesn't like the names. Dorian and I are trying to understand why the merch left the RISD store in the first place. What was the rationale? I don't know what led to it being pulled from the RISD store. And why can't it be back there? In those conversations, I've learned there were higher administrative decisions around those sorts of things.

Whenever I encounter resistance to the names, my rhetoric tends to be, you can't both allow the students to have the names that they want to have and then suppress that experience too. You can't have both. I think it's one of those things that the students feel is swept under the rug because it's not discussed in a formal way. And then the students feel isolated because they can't have merch to represent the teams they love.

RS

Are there any other examples of things like that where it feels like the administration kind of goes over the student body and takes away something that they supported for years?

SK

Part of the root of it is that RISD doesn't have a shared governance model or a functioning student government, which is challenging because there's disparate voices that are heard, and there's select students who participate in committees, and there isn't broad representation of the student voice. Even if there was broad representation of the student voice, they still need a seat at the table in decision making processes.

There's undoubtedly small things that happen

every day that aren't being heard because there isn't an avenue to advocate for that, whether that be a studio space size gets reduced or something like that.

RS

Have you been involved with the recent iteration of the Student Alliance? I know recently they were doing a pilot program in hopes of bringing it back.

SK

Yeah, I am involved in it. Right now there are two students who have been spending this past academic year, steeped in research at RISD. They attended a cabinet meeting, which is everybody who reports to President Williams, and they attended an Academic Council meeting, which is everybody who reports to the Provost, and so that captures most of senior leadership.

The student government researchers attended those meetings, asked questions to understand an administrative side, and then at the student level, they did some tabling in the Met, and they also administered a survey, which we had pretty good response rates for. They're benchmarking similar institutions, art and design institutions, small liberal arts colleges, to understand how their student governments function. And so both the internal and external are combining for those students to put together a set of recommendations for what student government should look like starting next year.

I think part of the challenge for student government at RISD, at least since I've seen it, is the structure has been wholly academic. Most institutions have a student government that has an academic subset, but then they also have someone who represents Housing and Dining, and they meet with the head of housing and dining and someone who oversees the holistic student experience. The goal is to create more committee structures that regularly meet with the administrators who oversee major functional areas of the college. A new position is being created called peer success advisors, and there will be peer advisors through the majors that are doing more of what the Department Representatives used to do.

RS

As the Director of CSI, could you tell me about how athletic clubs are structured at RISD and generally, how new clubs are brought about?

SK

It's been interesting with the athletics program here. When I started, Byron Olson was here in

Dorian Epps's position, as well as a coach. Byron is the first person to ever be in all records that we can find as a professional staff member that was in athletics. He was really the first staff member that was just charged with fitness and athletics that we found on record when he started. He was actually part time. It wasn't until 2022 that his position became full time. Luckily, we got an endowment from Joe Gebbia, which helped to support Kyree Saintilus's position. Really, the endowment went towards Byron, but that freed up the dollars on a back end to bring Kyree in. So just in the last three years, it's gone from one part time staff member to two staff members, one of which is full time, one of which is part time. My goal is to eventually get college athletics to be its own department at RISD under Student Life.

We've found in our own research that sports at RISD have been around since 1912 and yet it didn't have a staff member until 2012. There's a hundred years of it being understaffed. I really want it to be seen as a pillar of wellness at RISD.

Back to your original question about club structure, where do they fit into the club model and where do they diverge? Our current model has more strict procedures around travel, whereas the athletic clubs travel often. Athletics clubs also require waivers. We never see that in the crochet club. They're fundamentally different organizations. The athletic clubs also require facilities which non athletics don't need. Facilities require competitive bids, which is a financial procedure where we have to bid out for pricing. We then need to hire independent contractors as well like coaches, referees, and scorekeepers. Under its own department, the sports teams wouldn't be beholden to this kind of structure.

RS

How does the school go about allocating funds and the budget for clubs?

SK

When I first started, the CSI had seven staff members normally, and five of the positions were vacant. COVID was definitely a big part of that. I think that was a time of change for a lot of people.

RS

Had you inherited any kind of support or mentorship from previous employees?

SK

It was just Brenda, who still works here at CSI. Brenda. My boss was an interim. And then another

came right after as the previous one ended their last month. We had two back to back interims, and I was in between the two of them. There was no history. I really didn't have anybody to talk to about how things were run except Brenda and Byron. So what I did was a seven year financial look back. Normally, you could do a five year look back financially. But we did seven because two years were COVID. We looked at the historical spend for the clubs and allocated a budget that was commensurate with that, taking out COVID and factoring for inflation. That was the best I could do—a shot in the dark.

Once we came back, some of the clubs were not happy with the funding they got, and all I could say was sorry. We ended up having really good discussions with some of the clubs, and let them know there's only so much to go around. It's rooted in the Student Activities Fee that every student, undergraduate and graduate, pays every fall. That's where almost all of the money at the school comes from: the students.

RS

Does the school ever receive donations from alumni that want it spent towards developing the athletic programs?

SK

RISD prefers unrestricted giving. Unrestricted giving allows the school to put it where the school needs it most, yeah, but you can donate to whatever you want. There's a few different types of accounts at RISD, and the account that the Student Activities Fee is in is one where at the end of the year, all of the club budgets get swept up into a centralized pot, and that central pot rolls over into the subsequent year. The reason is that it's a restricted fund to be used for a very specific purpose. It's used for things like clubs, artist ball, the student art sale, yearbook, and others. Those sort of initiatives like Senior Week and the Welcome Week block party comes directly from the Student Activities Fee.

All this to say, the way that the club budgets were first allocated was historical spend, totally rooted in how much money they spent historically. We quickly realized that's not great, because just because that's what they spent historically doesn't mean that's what they plan to spend year on year, right? You might have, obviously, leadership turns over in clubs. You might have a new leader with new ideas, and they want to do something different. And so going based on history doesn't really work anymore.

So now we do the budget proposals. When you all submit the budget proposals, we take them in totality. Very often the amount that the clubs have proposed exceeds the available budget. Though I need to update the templates since I try to look at them at a granular level. When a club asks for \$20,000 but doesn't specify for what, I don't know if it should be approved or not.

RS

How does a RISD student go about proposing a sports club nowadays? Knowing how it was done in the 1960's and early 2000's, I'm curious what the current channels are like and how budgets are approved and so on.

SK

Every year there's an application for new clubs that's open from April 15 to May 15, and it's available for anybody who wants to apply. After May 15, it gets reviewed two different ways. On the athletic end, it's Kyree looking over it. On the non athletic end, it's Jade, who's the Assistant Director of Student Organizations. Then it goes up to Chelsea on this end at CSI, who's our Associate Director, and then Dorian. Then they all come to me, and then they go backwards. So it's like a review up and then back again.

My review is solely to look at, is it financially viable? We can't add a new club that costs an absurd amount. When a ballroom dancing club applied last year, as a brand new club, we decided it was athletic, because it's based on physical movement. I believe they proposed \$17,000 off the rip. I knew we couldn't add that to our portfolio overnight. We don't want to take funds away from long-standing clubs like Mango and the Balls.

I also have to consider risk management, and I sometimes run them by the Associate Dean of Students just to say "is this something that we should have on our radar?" Once there was a group of students that applied to be a drifting club. They wanted cars to drift the streets of Providence. That's definitely not something we can do.

Jade, Chelsea, Kyree, and Dorian are looking at new clubs from the perspective of our mission. Is this club something that would be great at RISD? Is it unique? We wouldn't allow another basketball team, because we already have one. Once a club is approved, then you end up getting a budget and all that stuff. We don't normally allocate large budgets right out of the gate. Brand new clubs do not spend their full budget because they have all these grand ideas, and then when they start to do it, they realize the scope and cut back.

RS

What is your perspective on the idea of how athletic activity influences student work in the studio? Do you see athletics at RISD as an important part of the general well being of students, in relation to both their physical and mental health?

SK

Our health educator, Eliana, has worked hard to adopt the Ten Dimensions of Wellness model at RISD. When I think of the athletic clubs, I think of two pillars of the model specifically, which are physical wellness and social wellness. Sports drive such a community. There's also a growth trajectory where you can become a captain and there's an ecosystem of growth and development between coaches and students.

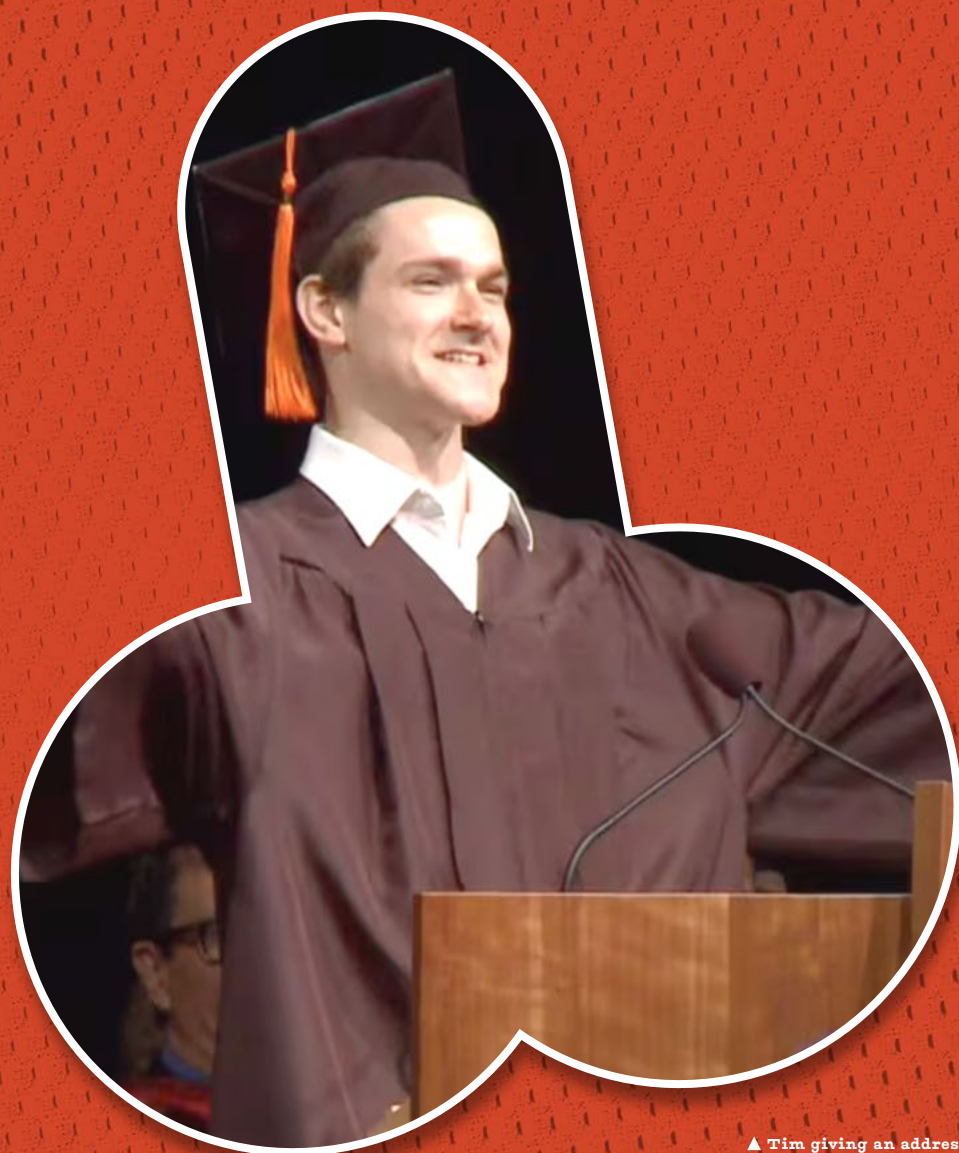
I'm really thinking of the intersection of art and fitness, which we talked about a lot with Dorian. Byron really was the one to first bring up this concept to me. These two areas are not isolated, and thinking through ways in which that can be more explicit for students. Byron held the mural contest in the Student Fitness Center. He was really interested in also doing a fitness class that was for artists and focused on stretching your wrists and back and things like that.

I don't have a background in athletics. But the idea of intersecting athletics and fitness makes so much sense to me.



I don't have a background in athletics. But the idea of intersecting athletics and fitness makes so much sense to me.

– Sarah Knarr



▲ Tim giving an address as the Undergraduate Student Speaker during his commencement ceremony. June 2016

An interview with...

Tim Plummer 16 GD

Every team needs their star players, coaches, waterboys, referees, and fans, but what about the announcers? Tim Plummer was one of the first RISD alumni that I reached out to for this project, as his name came up while discussing this project with Graphic Design professor Elizabeth Goodspeed 16 GD. In a way, she seemed to remember Tim's work as the announcer for Balls' games more than anything associated with the play on the court, and perhaps that was the goal. Sometimes all you need for an entertaining game is someone making jokes about the less than entertaining play. Tim is well remembered for his deep voice and public speaking skills, as he also gave a speech during his Commencement ceremony in 2016.

RYAN SCOTT

Just to start off broadly, could you tell me your graduation year, major, and how many years you were involved with the Balls team?

TIM PLUMMER

I graduated from the Graphic Design program in 2016 so I was at RISD from 2012 to 2016. I don't remember exactly when I started commentating the games, but I want to say it was in either my sophomore or junior year, so I would guess I was doing it from like 2014 or 2015 through the end of 2016.

RS

What's your history with the game of basketball before coming to RISD? Did you play on any organized teams before college? Did you have any public speaking or performance experience?

TP

Basketball was never really my game, but I know the rules and how it's played. I only played it during recess when I was younger. I played ice hockey when I was growing up, and these days, I play soccer more.

When it comes to performance experience, I did musical theater and theater more broadly back

in high school, and I was part of the RISD theater program. I think the reason that I got tapped to commentate the games in the first place was because I'd done some voice over work for some friends in the FAV department so I had a reputation as a voiceover person. One of the Balls players, Forest O'Donoghue, came to me and said, "Hey, we're thinking of doing live commentary at the Games. Is that something that you'd be interested in doing?" And I said, "Yeah, why not?"

RS

Do you know if there was any commentary before that time at Balls games?

TP

I don't think so, but I don't know for sure. There's a lot of RISD history that I don't have visibility into because people come and go, but I hadn't heard of anything like that.

RS

When did you first become aware of the team? Was it while you were applying to RISD? Was it one of those things you hear about, like, "oh, the mascot is called Scrotie and there's a hockey team called the Nads" and stuff like that? Or did it take some time to discover the team?

TP

I heard about Scrotie when I was applying. I thought it was a fun, quirky thing. I didn't know much about the different sports teams until I was firmly at RISD. It was something that I had to learn over time.

RS

What does the name of the team kind of mean to you? How did the spirit of the team itself influence your commentary style?

TP

The name just makes sense given who we are as a school. When I first saw some Balls merch in the RISD store with the slogan: "when the heat is on, the Balls stick together" I knew that's what we were going for. That's the vibe of the team, and I thought it was just brilliant.

I ended up co-commentating with another guy named Adam Blake [16 AP]. He knew less about basketball than I did, but he has this infectious energy to him. He has a very out there and in-your-face kind of personality. Between the two of us, I was the straight man, actually commentating on the game. I was paying attention to what was happening and

trying to cue the crowd in and get them involved. But Adam was adding in color that had nothing to do with basketball—usually. He would frequently hit on the players from our team and the opposing team while we were commentating. It got to a point where some of the other teams complained—fairly, I think. It would be a bit of a home court advantage to have somebody distracting your players. So they complained to us and the compromise that we reached was we would only do live commentary while our team had the ball, and when their team had the ball, we would keep quiet.

RS

How did Adam come to work with the team?

TP

I think Forrest reached out to him separately. He thought "what combination of personalities could potentially have a fun dynamic?" And I think it was a good instinct from him, it ended up working out quite uniquely.

RS

You mentioned in a previous conversation we shared that Adam would perform Beyoncé dance parties at halftime. What other student led entertainment was present at home games?

TP

I don't remember much besides that. It was a free form environment. We had control over the PA system, so we would just plug Adam's phone in and hit whatever playlist he fancied on that day. Usually Beyoncé was prominently featured, but there was definitely a variety. Usually the halftime entertainment would be the two of us, just going out and dancing, but we tried to get other people involved from the RISD crowd, but also from any of the visiting crowds. It was a good time.

RS

How did the venue, Wheeler Gym, help the dynamic? Since it's on Hope Street and so close to RISD campus, I feel like it's a big draw for the community.

TP

It was super easy to get people out there, and considering the overall quality of our team in terms of competitiveness—which was not extremely high—it was honestly amazing how much support we got out there. There was a group of people in my class who were all part of the team. They were all popular and had many friends so that just inherently

meant that the team had a certain draw. I think the commentary and overall fun increased that novelty factor, and made it so that people were happy to come out and watch.

RS

Yeah, did Scrotie ever attend a Balls game during your time with the team?

TP

Yeah, I never found out who it was, but the suit was found at one point and it came. It was frankly disgusting, but you know, what else can you expect?

RS

Do you mean the suit itself was disgusting, or just the presence of a giant penis at games was disgusting?

TP

The presence of a giant penis I can handle. It was more the detail and different aspects of the suit. It was like this, highly detailed one.

RS

What games do you remember most as an announcer and or spectator, and what was the overall vibe of home games?

TP

We definitely had the biggest rivalry with Pratt since they were another art school who was also in the same division. There was some hostility towards them or some animosity. I think that was where we initially got handed the "you're not allowed to commentate while the other team has the ball" ban, which, again, I understand it is a serious advantage when somebody is trying to get in your head while you're playing. But besides that, Cooper Union was still in the league at the time. MassArt was still in the league at the time, and I honestly don't remember the other teams.

RS

Okay, was there something that led to the big Pratt rivalry? Were you always going back and forth every year, or was one team always better than the other?

TP

I think it was because we were two big art schools—that's all it really boiled down to overall. In terms of competitiveness, I don't remember who did more winning. It was pretty even between the two teams.

RS

How did you prepare for games? Did you focus on keeping track of stats or individual players?

TP

I focused more on the players. I knew a decent chunk of the players who were in my class, but there was also a decent chunk of them that I didn't really know, so I had to go around to make sure I knew all of their names and numbers. Over time, you get a feeling for who's playing what role on the team. I didn't have the bandwidth for stat keeping, I was very focused more on the game itself.

RS

Was there a specific player who was the most fun to watch?

TP

Forrest O'Donoghue, Conner Griffith, and Luke Gordon were all in my class and they were all pretty good at basketball. So they were definitely fun to watch. Forest was pretty tall and had this sort of like silky elegance to him on the court. Dexter Foster was also very slick on the court.

RS

Do you think your time as announcer has helped you during your career after RISD or influenced how you approach your work?

TP

It was a one of a kind experience, for sure. I was already pretty comfortable with public speaking beforehand, but I think it really helped me settle into it a little bit as something that I now do on a recurring basis. In my job I have that responsibility to speak up and not shrink away from following up with people. I was also the 2016 class speaker. So that was also a relevant experience, and it meant that when I was going up on stage, a lot of people already knew me from the Balls games, even if I hadn't interacted with them previously.

RS

Do you remember any other sports teams, besides the Balls and Nads, that were around at RISD during your time?

TP

I played on a flag football team that didn't have a clever name. It was just like a flag football team and we played in a small league at Brown. There was some Ultimate Frisbee, I also don't think that they had a name and it was more of a casual pickup



***I think the commentary
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and watch.***

***– Anthony Petrie
04 GD***

thing. I also played in Midnight Soccer, it was a ton of fun. It reignited my love of that game after not playing for a long time and now it's the game that I play most frequently in my life.

I know that there were the RISD Jugs, the women's soccer team. Besides that, there was a pretty active cycling club at the time. That's all that I remember, just ground up, student-led sort of things, nothing that was run by the school, or had organization beyond just a bunch of overworked art school kids making it happen.

RS

I know from my time on the team that we've had a few announcers come and go but never stick around for a majority of the season. What advice can you give to students who want to take on the challenge and support in nonplayer roles?

TP

The game of basketball is supposed to be fun and anything that you can do to up the entertainment value will mean that there's more of a crowd, there's more support, and that the people who are playing for your team are having a better time. That's your responsibility as a commentator: to set up that entertainment scenario for everyone, and if you get the right people involved, and they talk to their friends, and there's enough organic support for it, it will naturally coalesce into something that people want to go out of their way to do. It's an entertaining thing to do if you've got the time for it. Just focus on trying to create that space. It definitely helps if you've got two completely different dynamics that are commenting and playing off one another. I think that was a big part of our entertainment value. Myself alone couldn't have drawn nearly as many people as me and Adam together were able to do.

RS

Did you have any signature catch phrases or call outs or cheers that you led?

TP

I don't remember, I really don't. We probably did. Adam certainly had recurring phrases like "Oh, he's cute" and that sort of thing. It was mostly the half-time Beyoncé dance party that was the hallmark thing we would do.

●●



▲ Gresh with the screens and a sweatshirt he printed. June 2026

An interview with...

Gresh Chapman 25 ID

When Balls and Nads merch began to leave the RISD Store around late 2022, it was people like Gresh who helped keep the image of the team alive. Using experience gained in a screenprinting class, he led the effort to rebrand the team as student-led and student-designed, putting emphasis on the DIY aesthetic of simple screen printed shirts using thrifted clothing. Though he stepped away from the team during his senior year due to time constraints, he passed that same screen on to me, and after graduation I hope to do the same. Simple traditions and student creativity are the heart of the Balls, and Gresh is a part of that.

RYAN SCOTT

What's your history with the game of basketball before coming to RISD? Did you play on any organized teams before college?

GRESH CHAPMAN

I was not much of a basketball player. My main sport in high school was diving, which was in the winter, so I didn't really play hoops before RISD. I played a little bit when I was in middle school, maybe two or three years.

I used to watch the Knicks in one of the prime Knicks eras—I guess they're kind of back now, but I used to watch the Carmelo era, and I was a big NBA fan. I grew up around UVA basketball too, so I would go watch a lot of college basketball, mostly. Until I came here I wasn't much of a player, my hoop dreams were never really that.

RS

When did you first become aware of the Balls team?

GC

Before I came to RISD for sure. I think the lore around Scrotie and around the Balls team is pretty legendary, and it's definitely online, you know, you can see a lot about it. So I definitely dreamed of

playing for the Balls, but I never expected I'd be one of the captains.

RS

What drew you to that? Why was it a goal of yours to make the team, considering you didn't have previous experience with basketball?

GC

I think the idea of being the weird artsy kid in high school and then at art school being a jock and college athlete would be really funny. I could just tell, having an interest in design and merch, it was going to be really fun to be a part of. Because even if there was no camaraderie around the team, which we lack a little bit now but it's okay, the camaraderie around the brand and people who haven't been to a game or know our record wearing the shirts everywhere seemed like the biggest piece of school spirit.

RS

What was the tryout experience like, considering it was your first time playing on a team like that?

GC

Yeah. So it was COVID, fall of 2021. We were still at the JCC (Jewish Community Center), where Byron worked as a gym manager. We would go in at the beginning of practice and just warm up and Byron would be bench pressing. He was the only person that used the gym it seemed.

We held tryouts there, maybe thirty people showed up, so probably ten cuts. Austin [Belanger ID '25] and I were right on the edge for sure. Austin and I did not think we were going to make it. But sure enough, Byron came up to us both after, and you could kind of tell he was taking a chance.

But he liked our spirit and our attitude. We both seemed athletic in weird ways. Austin had done Jiu Jitsu or karate or something and I had done diving, so we were these weird acrobats. We were each other's lifeline throughout that first season, because neither of us were good at all.

RS

You were involved with the rowing team too at some point right?

GC

Yeah. During my first two years at RISD, I was trying all the athletics.

The following year in the fall of 2022 we were on the first Head of the Charles Regatta boat from RISD. I think it was the first RISD rowing boat ever. It

was the first real year of RISD rowing that we know. We rode in the Head of the Charles, which is crazy. None of us knew how to row. So it was again this experience of going from nothing to competing at a somewhat high level.

RS

What other sports did you try?

GC

I tried climbing and Midnight Soccer. Some other stuff I went to was more just pick up. I went to a lot of Nads games. I did some of the wrestling stuff—mixed martial arts. So, yeah, yeah. I really wasn't expecting anything coming in. I didn't think I would make the Balls when I first was dreaming of going to RISD, but once I got to the tryouts, I thought maybe the stakes aren't that high.

RS

Back to the Balls team, how did you react when you learned that the RISD store had stopped selling Balls merch the public? What was the team's reaction, either from the coach, Byron, or other members of the Balls team?

GC

It was around fall of 2022 that it really started to evaporate. It was a slow phase out. When I started on the team we knew that it was, that they're gonna get rid of it at some point. During my freshman year I sent Byron this whole merch drop list that I wanted to do, because we still had this big budget. We were gonna get a big run manufactured and sell them, but I think they nixed a lot because it was, "inappropriate" foam fingers or shirts that said "I love Balls" with an upside down heart to look like something else. I came in with a big idea of wanting to do merch, because I just didn't think what they had in the store was good.

So I started printing. Somehow I got CSI to pay me that freshman year to print shirts for the Balls. And the idea was they pay me and then we'd give them away. We gave away a bunch, but I still had a lot left over, so I started selling them too. That was totally sheisty, because they had paid me to make that. It was like a giveaway. They paid me to make 50, and with the budget they paid me for that, I was able to make it to 150 or something. They didn't know I was gonna do the upcycle blanks thing.

RS

Was it just the basic Balls logo on the shirts? And then where did the idea come from to upcycle shirts from Savers?

GC

It's always been the same screen. I may have remade it once or twice but it's been the same file like this. The design has never changed. I guess maybe the influence might have been that my freshman year roommate was doing a lot with upcycled clothes, sewing stuff and printing with them. I thought it was a cool idea. I knew people would want it more than the usual merch, because not only is there less guilt around buying something used, but there's also way more variety. RISD kids don't want to all be wearing the same thing. It led to all sorts of funny, as you know, funny crossover episodes.

For the record, I printed over 500 ball shirts. So that's like a core of the student population buying a ball shirt. And then also around 200 of the Tits tanks, a couple Climbax shirts.

RS

How did you come across this specific screen? It feels like an artifact of the club now.

GC

I worked in the screen print lab in Prov Wash — God, this was another funny coincidence — this is maybe actually part of the origin story of how I started printing. My roommate was in the Two Legged Print Wintersession class. The teacher, Randy, he's a legend. He was so chill during Wintersession that he would let me come in and print with them during the day, even though I wasn't in the class, and I just made friends with him. Then he hired me as a print monitor, even though I had no qualifications. I was helping Illustration seniors make their prints while I was a freshman or sophomore.

That screen was from the print lab down there at ProvWash. They just have a ton of screens people leave behind. Then I would heat press them in the textiles dye lab because that's just where I would go.

RS

How did the community react to this new source and kind of new kind of Balls merchandise? How did the administration react?

GC

The community reaction was really strong. A lot of people loved them.

I should mention this too that during my freshman year, because we were coming out of COVID, we had no games. We had maybe one game at the very end of the season. And I think it was Public Safety. It was a big event. There had been no community

events all year, no parties, no nothing. Everyone came to this. Probably three or four-hundred people were there. It was huge for a Balls game. We had a merch rack that I set up and someone getting Venmos while I was playing and it completely sold out. I came back after the game and the Venmo account was maxed. No merch was left, it was nuts.

So then I started printing more, doing sales like the Alumni Sale, or doing the other sales on campus like that. We tried to make it a way to come out to the game, to get this specific one that's really fire.

RS

How did you promote the game? Was it just posters, word of mouth, or just because it was something to do?

GC

Mostly on Instagram or we'd give a couple shirts out and then say "come to the game and get more".

I went to the RISD store admin, Tyla, to try to get the shirts put in the store. When I went in there she said it was out of their control. They love the Balls and Nads and wish they could keep that stuff in stock, they were just told not to. They still thought it was great, so I brought them a bunch of samples. They were really positive, but they said they've tried to do a thing where you sell student art there, but for bureaucratic reasons they couldn't sell this or pay the students in a certain way.

The RISD store is really its own separate business. It's like an independent, totally sovereign business.

RS

What about the Balls hat you're wearing?

GC

These are gen two, they're not as cool as the ones where the "RISD" is included. The first ones were like a patch, and then it had "RISD" airbrushed on with a stencil. The hats were part of the original merch drop thing. I bought the Balls patches all in bulk from the RISD store. I think I bought like 100 or 200 patches, maybe with the RISD Balls budget. They're all second hand hats from Savers, eBay, super random.

RS

When you go to Savers to get the hats or eBay or something, are you using your own money to pay or something from the team budget?

GC

I was always using my own. The only time I didn't



***The idea of being the weird artsy
kid in high school and then at art
school being a jock and college
athlete would be really funny.***

***– Gresh Chapman
25 ID***



was when I was wired money to pay for the first batch of shirts. One of my goals freshman year was to make back as much of my tuition as I could.

RS

What are some of your favorite memories of the team, both on and off the court?

GC

There was one time that was pretty funny. It was my first year as a cap and I wanted to do some community building because the team never really had the best sense of community.

So I tried to get everyone out to get a drink or whatever. I was like, “hey, bar tab on the Balls”. It

It really was the first time you’d seen everyone from RISD in one room. I think we had four or five fan buses go to the game.

RS

I remember hearing from past teammates about an infamous party “hosted” by the Balls just before my time here. Is that true?

GC

Yeah, I had COVID at the time so I was quarantined in 15 West but the party was a couple buildings down. It was right before winter break. Someone on the team had a friend that was pretty sketchy, like a Providence penthouse guy, and he hosted it. It

▼ Gresh during our conversation, photographed with the original screens he used to print the Balls shirts. June 2026



was on me. I said to come to the Wild Colonial and about three guys showed up, but it was fun. It did exactly what we needed. Everyone had a couple of drinks and was really loose and good humor. The other only other time I can think of for that was, like, when we all went to Harry’s after a road game. On the court, that freshman year game at the Providence Country Day School was something. Everyone was there, and that was pretty amazing.

was an open bar, they weren’t checking IDs, people were spray painting on the walls. I heard crazy shit about that party. It was that first year in COVID so no one had gone to any parties. It sounded like everyone went, even my friends who had never been to a Balls game were there.

I don’t know if this part is true since one of the captains at the time told me about it afterwards but at one point the guy who owned the place invited all

the captains to come upstairs. He wanted to have them come up to have a drink or whatever. He could have been fucking with me, but he said the guy had paid sex workers in the VIP lounge and a tank of piranhas.

RS

Oh, shit.

GC

Yeah some James Bond shit.

RS

Do you think the party, infamous or not, helped with the popularity of the club? Did they see you guys as the “bad boys” of campus after that?

GC

Yeah it was about two months before our first game so not only did we have the first official community event of that year, we also did the first reckless party of that year, and honestly, the only real party of my first year. So it totally added this funny personality to our public image. I don’t think we could ever live up to that. I forgot about that, man. That was nuts.

RS

What does the team, and, more specifically, its name and imagery, mean to you? How did it influence your approach to what you brought to the club and how you played the game? How serious did it seem to you?

GC

It just made it more approachable, it seems really unserious. If the team had a legit name, I think I would have been pretty apprehensive to get involved, because I would have thought “Oh, they’re probably a real basketball team with real players”. But because it’s the “RISD Balls”, I knew it was just a joke, and it can be good or bad.

RS

Do you think your time on the team as a captain and merchandise producer influenced your current practice and just how you’ve kept yourself organized?

GC

In a big way it was my first leadership role. I had to learn a lot about being a leader, especially when

(next spread) A variety of shirts and hats produced by Gresh during his time on the team. c. 2022–2024

you’re less qualified than most of the people you’re leading.

I was never a good basketball player, so I had to thread that line, and you hear a lot of CEOs saying they have to go demand something from someone that’s smarter than them. You have to be a leader for all these people that are, in some ways, better than you. That was a good learning experience.

It definitely made me shift my self identity. Funny enough it helped with my resume too with leadership as a part of the creative practice.

Since then, I’ve done other other leadership roles and been more comfortable.

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▲ Tila photographed for "Uncategorized" series by Bill Bowles. September 2016

An interview with...

Tila Adams

Tila has been a part of the RISD Store since 1988. As a result, she watched the RISD Balls and Nads become a part of the public side of the institution as many students visiting campus for the first time would walk into the store to find large displays with innuendo-based sports teams. Tila understands that RISD thrives from the creativity of its students, and by presenting these teams as just another fun part of the community, it reached an audience beyond the RISD bubble and became a part of the local culture. Sadly, Balls and Nads merch isn't sold in the store anymore, but there is hope that one day that the team can be represented in the RISD Store once again.

RYAN SCOTT

When you first began working at RISD, do you remember hearing anything about the sports culture from students or other employees?

TILA ADAMS

I began to hear more about the sports teams around the time Joe Gebbia was here, because I wasn't a part of a lot of those conversations early on in my time here as a buyer. When I did first hear about it, it was definitely a surprise since I didn't relate RISD to sports at all.

RS

So when did you first interact with Joe Gebbia along with the Balls and Nads?

TA

When he came to the RISD Store, he spoke to our store manager at the time. I was still working in art supplies so I wasn't the main leader. The team came to the RISD Store first asking for them to sponsor the team. If I'm correct, the store gave them around \$4,000 to \$5,000 and they used part of that funding to build a cabinet to display photos of the team, jerseys, and other things.

It moved around a few times but it was never put in the store. At the time we didn't have any Balls or

Nads merch so it was a way to support the teams in a visible way.

RS

There wasn't any funding from the Office of Student Life (OSL) at that time? It was just through donation from the RISD Store?

TA

I don't remember if that was completely the case but it felt like most of their funding came from us in the beginning.

RS

I have seen mentions of a "Trophy Case" that was displayed in the building.

TA

Yes, that's it!

RS

Do you know where it is now?

TA

I do not. At one point it may have been moved to CSI in Carr House of the Student Fitness Center (SFC) but I'm not sure.

RS

Do you remember when merch for the teams began to be sold in the store?

TA

Yes, Joe contacted the RISD Store again and submitted the art for the team that he wanted printed on items. At first I think many people were taken aback by the imagery, but it didn't prevent us from selling it. It was well received immediately and about 20% of the profits went directly back to the clubs. There were t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, water bottles, stickers, buttons, and a kind of coaches jacket.

RS

And that all sold well?

TA

Absolutely. Not just students were buying it either. We would have customers not affiliated with the school at all who saw it online and just wanted one. It all sold online very well.

RS

Did the store ever have any other items that connected with the wider community outside of

Providence like the Balls and Nads items?

TA

Not within official RISD merchandise. The alumni collection sometimes but it was special. It was different.

RS

To go beyond just the obvious appeal of innuendo jokes on a shirt, why do you think people were so drawn to the Balls and Nads merchandise?

TA

Because no one associated sports with an art school. Also when people would go to the Balls or Nads games they wanted a piece of the team and bought a shirt or sticker. In general, people just wanted to support the team and students definitely loved it for that.

RS

Were there any special or strange items that the Balls logo was ever put on? How far did you push what could be sold at the RISD Store?

TA

We had boxers at one point with the Balls logo printed all over them. We have tried to do jerseys in the past and are always getting calls about it but it was just too difficult to figure out sourcing and pricing.

RS

Did any other clubs or organizations at RISD have their merchandise sold at the store besides the Balls and Nads?

TA

We had the fencing team, the Pricks, at one point. There was a soccer team and cycling as well. For the cycling team we had their actual jerseys, shorts, and hats. Their socks were best sellers, they were long pink socks with their logo on the side.

RS

How did the store go about displaying the merchandise alongside everything else it had to offer?

TA

It was something that we drew attention to. We had it displayed by the front entrance, the back, everywhere else. We kept it central because it was so popular and spoke to our community. It was never hidden away on a shelf somewhere, it was always prominent in the store.

RS

Did the Balls and Nads merch give the RISD Store a certain reputation?

TA

When I was a buyer, everywhere I went people would ask me about the teams. It was interesting beyond RISD. It was great to work with students like Joe who came to the store and built that relationship with us. Whenever he comes to campus he always visits the store and talks about it and I think it was very important to everyone involved to see that project come to life. It's really special to point to something and say "I worked with the artist who made that" and people loved it. Students loved it. The community loved it.

I enjoy working with students. It's obvious but we have a very creative community here, and there's such an opportunity to be able to work with future great artists and help develop their ideas.

RS

Today, what would the process be like if a student wanted to do something similar and have their original work sold in the store, while still attending the school?

▼ An array of RISD Balls merchandise that was available at the RISD Store over the years. January 2018





***We kept it central because it
was so popular and spoke to our
community. It was never hidden
away on a shelf somewhere.***

– Tila Adams





▲ Dorian at his office in the Student Fitness Center (SFC).
July 2025

An interview with...

Coach Dorian Epps 21 ID

Dorian Epps is the current coach of the RISD Balls, and possibly one of the most enthusiastic. Following in the footsteps of former coach Byron Olson, Dorian was also a student turned coach. Though his career as the team's coach is still young, Dorian is very ambitious with his plans for the team in the coming years, as he detailed in our conversation. If you ever want to talk about the Balls with someone at RISD, you should check with him first.

RYAN SCOTT

Just to start, could you tell me what your major at RISD was, your graduation year, and how many years you were involved with the team as either a player, captain or coach?

DORIAN EPPS

I graduated from Industrial Design in 2021 and was a captain of the team from 2019 to 2021. I joined as an assistant coach in 2023 and later became the head coach in 2024.

RS

What was your history with basketball before coming to RISD?

DE

I started playing basketball shortly after third grad. I didn't really like it that much because I wasn't good at it, and I dropped it and started focusing on doing art. It kind of came full circle in sixth grade, because I had a growth spurt and I grew seven inches, from 5'9" to 6'5". I was going to summer camps and things like that because my school didn't have a basketball team. So when I transferred to Winchester Thurston in Pittsburgh, I had a coach that thought I had a chance to be a really good basketball player.

I had never been told that because I was clumsy, accident prone, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I got really into it during my eighth grade year because there was this other kid on the team, Evan Fraser, who was the same height doing all these cool moves with dribbling and making shots and it woke something in me where I thought I could be that.

From ninth grade until I graduated, I was always trying to find ways to play basketball. I got injured my sophomore year at the end of the season, and had to miss playoffs, which was probably one of the most heartbreaking moments. I injured both my knees. I split my right patellar tendon and tore my left one. That led to me realizing that I could not really participate in basketball at the high level capacity that I wanted to originally, but I still loved and still wanted to play it. So I shifted to focusing on my artwork for the majority of the rest of high school, but I wanted to really just make a difference off the court if I couldn't be on it. That's when I started thinking about prosthetics and braces and footwear.

When I got to RISD, I found a home on the Balls. It changed my life for all the better. It re-established my connection with basketball, but also art, in a way that I understood that intersection.

RS

Did you dunk for the first time when you were playing in high school? I think it's kind of intimidating to be a new player on the Balls nowadays and have the coach be so much better at jumping and dunking than everybody else on the court out there. [Laughs]

DE

The first time that I ever dunked a ball was the last day of eighth grade before I went into high school. I was so fixated on dunking. At least one time I dunked the ball while playing against Evan, and we were competing to see who could dunk. I got one, and I looked at him, and we both looked at each other going "oh shit!" Screaming, running around the gym, and in that moment I realized that this felt good. Dunking feels amazing. Blocking the shit out of people is amazing too. But dunking the ball and just having that moment where you're the only person at that height above the rim, it's the best feeling.

That honestly shaped how I continued to be a jumper, which then led to me getting knee injuries. But it really changed my trajectory with basketball and understanding that I had the jumping ability of people that were a lot taller than me.



▲ The first poster Dorian made for a Balls game at RISD. February 2, 2018

RS

When did you first hear about the Balls?

DE

Around ninth grade when I went on a college tour. I met the captain of the team, Vaughan Lewis Carman, and he gave me my first tour as a freshman in high school. He is one of the main reasons why the team functioned at all while he was here. He's also a big part of why I understood the importance of the community that was being built by that team. We couldn't do anything without one another. We won as a team and we lost as a team, but people don't always understand that mentality. During practices he'd look at us and let us know we could joke around and have fun, but if we're running a play or practicing drills, he's reminding us that we've got a game in two days and need to take it seriously.

Having someone like that, and seeing how much love and time and energy he put into building the team, considering this was before there was any

endowment money or even Athletic Directors, Vaughan was doing that all as a student. CSI technically funded us, but organizing the games, calling all the schools, scheduling the transportation, getting snacks and stuff for all of us was done by the players like him and the other captain, Shawn Guo.

When I became captain I got a taste of that. The next year Byron got into the role as Athletic Director, and that was cool. But to see how much work he was putting in. It just blew me away. It made me feel like he cared so deeply about what the team meant to the school.

but then we'd pull an all-nighter, or we'd all go hang out and do our work together.

I also remember my last game that I played in before COVID was against Pratt. We had this bet with them where the President of RISD, Rosanne Somerson, had to eat a New York chilli dog if we lost. If we won, the Pratt team had to eat a lobster roll or some clam chowder or something like that. We lost that game and she never had to eat it but it's whatever.

I remember having a pain in my leg during that game, I didn't know what it was, I think I was just



RS

What do you remember about that Balls team before COVID, before the world fell apart?

DE

We were still practicing at Wheeler, our home gym. That's always been my home gym until I started coaching and going to Madeline Rogers.

That time before COVID was probably the most fun I ever had playing basketball. Even if we were losing, there were so many opportunities for us to just grow as individuals and make each other better. I had never played basketball as much as I did then. After practices we'd say "who wants to keep playing?" I haven't seen that in a while, honestly. We would just go and play at the OMAC for like, six

hours, and we knew we had studio work to do,

exhausted from practicing. But I remember we went to that game, and the entire time, I kept it to myself that I might be hurt but I still wanted to play.

That game was also the first time that I got a put-back dunk on someone. And after I did that dunk, I was so hyped and the adrenaline was pumping, and then like, five minutes later, my legs were like "Dude, why didn't you do that?" I just always wanted to play hard for the team. I always wanted to have a good time. We always made sure that we had fun in practices or games.

After the pandemic hit, it felt like I had lost a loved one. It was weird. It was like the Balls had become a person, and they suddenly moved away. It wasn't the same. We couldn't play. I had this void that I just kept trying to fill where I thought "maybe if I go out and dance, maybe if I go and start cooking, maybe if I do this or that it'll be fine". But nothing could ever

▲ Dorian in a game against Cooper Union. c. 2017-2018



replace what it meant to be on that team with those people that understood not only your experience, but wanted to compete and try new things.

RS

How did you keep in contact with the team during lockdown when everybody was off campus?

DE

Along with myself, the other co captain was Trey Hollinger. We would text each other every once in a while just to check in. I'd talk to Joe Inglima. We'd post videos on Instagram, on our stories, of us dunking and stuff.

Imagine all of us lined up on the baseline of a basketball court, and there's this invisible wall right next to each of us. You can look and you can try to talk, but you can't hear anything. That's how it was during the lockdown. I could see them doing cool stuff online and recognize them as my teammates and love them, but we couldn't go out and play.

RS

There wasn't an excuse to talk or hang out with them. You felt trapped in your own little pods?

DE

Yeah, it was unnatural, which is weird. We had just spent so much time together.

RS

Were there any other things you guys would do outside of the court, like going out partying, hanging out outside of practices and games and so on?

DE

We'd hang out at 70 Kennedy Plaza. We would go to Shawn

Guo's place. I would hang out with Vaughan in the Apparel department. I would see a lot of people at the Met. The Met became the hub, and especially before games. People eating there would see us coming to the Met. They'd wonder why we're all dressed up to play and we'd tell them we were going to play at the OMAC or we had a game that night. That's usually how we would get a lot of people to come to our games. I miss our crowd. I want y'all to have them again.

RS

What do you remember about that time leading up to the pandemic in 2020? I toured RISD for the first time the day before the first COVID case in Rhode Island was recorded, so I personally don't know what that culture was like before that time.

DE

Literally, the Pratt game happened just days before everything started shutting down. We had around four more games lined up, but they all had to get canceled, obviously. But in my head I was preparing for the Pratt game and although I knew I was hurt, I wanted to make it through the rest of those games.

There was just something about the way that our season ended where it almost left us wanting more, because we knew that there was more. If that was our last game that would have been fine,

◀ Dorian warming up for a game against Pratt. February 16, 2020

▼ Dorian coaches the team during a timeout while facing the Culinary Institute of America. January 25, 2025



but it's because I knew that there was so much more that we could have done or had that a part of me wishes for that year and a half of basketball I missed.

RS

What were the games against Cooper Union like? It seems like their basketball program was a casualty of the pandemic and never really came back.

DE

Those games were always fun. They had them in the most inconvenient and small gym. You could cross the half court line, but there was another like about six feet behind that that was the true back-court violation line. The Cooper Union team brought out a side of us that wanted to prove that we're the better artist athletes, and we were always competing with them in that way. We only beat them once during my time on the team when I was a freshman.

RS

During your time the Balls's Instagram was kind of reborn under the "Blue Balls" era. How did the team go about reinventing our social media presence?

DE

So that was when Xavier Hardison and Malik Sealy were captains. I just remember hearing that and being like "Oh, we're about to make some waves". That season was right before the pandemic. We did the jerseys on our own that got Roseanne mad at us, I forgot what it said but it was something provocative.

We were disappointed that the school was mad because we were like "it's just the color blue". And then we figured that we're gonna embrace it. My senior year those jerseys looked so clean. I loved everything about it. Come to find out like two years later that RISD changes all of our colors to blue. [Laughs]

RS

How did you promote the games during your time as a player?

DE

Facebook. Facebook Messenger was how we communicated, at least with the team. I forgot that we were on Facebook like that. I sound old. Facebook was huge, though, in terms of promoting games, we would put all of our posters there, all of our flyers. We would take questions from people. We would get messages in the DMS about information.

We would put up a lot of posters around campus, the street light that's right in front of the RISD Beach was always a big spot. We tried to put them in the central spaces where we knew a lot of students would see it. At that point, we didn't care about the faculty, because it already seemed like the faculty showed no interest in us, so we figured we'd only cater to the needs of the people that we are actually trying to serve, which is other students. We'd do merch giveaways at games, Gendo Taiko would perform at halftime. We'd give out beanies, sometimes jerseys, duffel bags with the RISD Balls logo. We had pennants too. There was so much stuff going on that it felt like we were an actual team.

The school hasn't really promoted or shared an interest in the sports teams, let alone the RISD Balls, like they used to. They took everything out of the store, and now students don't have things to represent themselves.

RS

Following graduation, how'd you find yourself shifting into an assistant coach position, and then after that, becoming the head coach?

DE

It was so fucking weird. Coaching the players that I was on the team with at one point was weird. They already knew who I was, and they knew how I could be at practice, how serious I took games, how competitive I wanted to be. But then there were the people that didn't know me, so I had to walk a fine line where I had to be a coach, but then also transition out of being a player. I could talk to y'all like fellow players all day, but if I'm not giving the instruction, the guidance, and trying to make a plan to help y'all win, we're not gonna win. It was an accountability shift, for sure.

After that first win as coach, being able to see the joy in all the players' faces and know that I didn't have to go on the court and do anything made me excited. I can truly do something off the court to help.

I'm just thankful for being able to have the luxury and the honor of transitioning from player to assistant coach to head coach and now, leading athletic programming at RISD. It makes me feel like I'm where I need to be to make effective change and see players that I care about doing projects like this. It makes it all feel like it's worth all the energy.

RS

Did Byron let you know before he was gonna step down and tell you that you were gonna take over the whole operation?

DE

Well, I wasn't ever planning on becoming the head coach. I kind of got thrown into it. There was supposed to be a coach after Byron left, but then he just stopped showing up and couldn't make it anymore, so I got the job. For half a season y'all didn't have a coach, then I came in January at the last minute and figured I could take over. We had that game after that where we won against Landmark College and I realized that this was gonna be fun.

Byron talked to me during that time before I became the coach. He knew I was a captain of the team and cared about it and had seen all of the back end of stuff, so he wanted to know if I wanted the position. I told him to let me sit with it for a week, but I knew I wanted to say yes. I didn't just want to say yes immediately, though. I wanted to be thoughtful, because I care about the team, so if I'm going to take over the position, I want to think it through first. I told him I'd do it, and then I started coaching. The transition was awesome. It's an honor.

RS

Now being a part of the RISD administration as an employee, what is that perspective like, looking at a thing like the RISD Balls, seeing how that's run and approving budgets?

DE

I want to shake things up. I think that's my biggest responsibility. There's not a priority around sports and wellness in the same capacity that there's signs around campus saying you should do yoga, mindful breathing, and eat healthier. There's more to it than just doing those things.

I want to put in that work, especially if it's going to leave long-lasting effects and have an impact. I'm glad that you're gonna have my name in this in some capacity, whatever you do, but I honestly wouldn't even care at this point if my name wasn't involved in any of the work for the Balls. I just want it to be something that continues, because it really did save me while I was here. It provided not only a community, but it provided an outlet. It was a sanctuary. It was everything that I needed to feel like I had a home. I had a professor during my freshman year who at one point told me that I should just save my money and drop out of RISD altogether.

RS

Are they still here?

DE

Nope, they got fired.



► Dorian dunks it down during the Balls Alumni Game. April 11, 2026

RS

[Laughs]

DE

You have those experiences, and then you go to practice that Tuesday night, and you're like, "Yeah, I had a rough day in spatial". And then the other guys in the room are "You'll get past it. Once you get to your sophomore year, it gets better. But focus on basketball, focus on being here with us right now." That alone changes everything. A switch just went off where I knew I belonged here. You have people here that see you and just being seen as enough by the people that were here.

This role is great. I love that I can make actual change, not only with the Balls but all the sports teams. But I think that I need to shift the culture around sports and what it means to be not only an artist but an athlete.

RS

What do you think about our team name? What does our innuendo-based sports humor change about your approach to the team?

DE

The Knicks were called the "Knickerbockers"—pants. You have the Spurs—the bottom part of the boot. You have the Oklahoma City Thunder—weather. A lot of these names don't shake things up except within the communities they represent. So the Spurs are related to cowboys and San Antonio has cowboys. Same with the Balls.

We go to art school, we're not supposed to have some super intimidating name. The name fits who we are and our identity, not to say that everyone here has balls, because obviously no. But the community that's here sits and draws genitals for hours during drawing studios their freshman year. We study models who drop their robes and we draw them nude.

RS

I've never heard that perspective before. Seeing it as a form of destigmatizing nudity or something.

DE

It's just a body part. It's a funny way of saying it though. We're not called the testicles, we're called the Balls. But there's the Balls, the Nads, the Tits, the Nips, the Sacks—all of them are just innuendos, but it's the body. It's a funny name, but it doesn't mean that I'm going to take the game as a joke.

The Balls are like family to me, like I genuinely found a home, and I found people that truly



***There's a wall here, where you're
either an athlete or an artist.
I want to break down that wall.
I want people to understand
you can be both.***



***– Coach Dorian
Epps 21 ID***

understood not only my trajectory, but my past. I was able to open up and talk to them and become a better person, because they understood where I was, where I was trying to go, and where they saw me heading, and they just kept me on a path that helped me thrive and grow.

That's why the most recent alumni game at the end of May meant everything. I got to meet people that I've seen doing incredible work, and it showed me that we have one of the most successful networks. We've had so many people do so many great things after graduating from RISD that it's almost insane that there's not more of an emphasis on sports here.

RS

How do you react when you meet these older players and you realize, not only were they a part of this basketball team and its history, but they're also incredible artists?

DE

It's always a shock. It wasn't what my expectations were going to be at all. It was almost like they just surpassed everything that I could have imagined. Obviously Joe Gebbia is a big one. Cameron Scott Davis did all of the character designs for Guitar Hero III. Then you also have people who do furniture design. You have people who came back and did faculty work and are adjunct professors. Other people like Manny Hernandez; a great graphic designer who did all of the stuff for the Balls posters and now he's still continuing to do amazing graphic design work in his real everyday life. In my case, I have a whole business outside of here that I try to grow and develop. Is it on any of the same levels as the people who graduated before me? No, but they give me hope that I will get to that point, or create something that's as meaningful or as impactful. There's a strong history of success on the Balls.

RS

How has your time on the team and the Balls in general influenced your own work? You've mentioned how your passion for footwear was spurred on by the high school injury and thinking about prosthetics and stuff like that.

DE

I think the best way to put it is: I fell in love with basketball over and over again. Not only because of the team, but because of the community that the team has created. My business called Blacktop Market focuses on the intersection of athletics and design.

That's what I tried to bring into this role: showing artists the interconnectedness of sports and art. If you're an architect, you're the one building the stadium, you're the one putting all the seats, you're the one making sure that everyone sees things from a certain perspective and feels a certain way in that space. That's a part of a sports experience. The jerseys we wear, the shorts we wear, somebody had to design all of that. Somebody had to wear it. Somebody had to test it. Somebody had to go through it. Someone chose the colors for it. The shoes you wear, that's a whole realm in itself.

Then you have all the other stuff, like the tunnels, when people are pregame outfits and whatnot. All of those things are curated experiences that are designed by artists and designers. We are so heavily rooted in that stuff, whether you see it or not, you can't separate yourself from it. So being able to show people how they're connected to the bigger picture is one of my biggest missions, not only with my business, but in this position.

RS

What do you see the future of the team being like, maybe five, ten, fifteen years from now?

DE

I'm hoping by the 30th anniversary of the team I've secured money for the RISD Balls to have a gym. I want us to all host a 30 year anniversary celebrating the fact that we finally have a space that celebrates us.

Before I even got into this role, I was looking for a gym space. I always thought that it would be amazing to not have to spend money renting a space and paying for all of this transportation and related stuff.

RS

I know one guy who would put his name on it if he wanted to. [Laughs]

DE

I think it'd be good. They put his name on the court, I don't care. I'll put it in big letters right on the sidelines too! If there were any way to just have the space that could truly be ours, I think that that would really shift the mentality of the community here. It could be used for so much more than basketball too. Being able to have a facility that celebrated sports that was under the RISD name would make people feel like it's okay to be an athlete here right now. There's a wall here, where you're either an athlete or an artist. I want to break down that wall. I want people to understand you can be both of those things and I want to be able to celebrate in a space.

Ten years from that, I want to be able to say that

my knees are still healthy, and I want to hopefully see that the team is still going strong. Y'all are stuck with me for a while, I truly want to make an impact, because this team has meant a lot to me. Basketball means a lot to me. Y'all mean a lot to me. I think we as a community of past and present players have gone through a lot together, whether it was during the same time or not. We're unified in such a unique way that I think if that fizzles out, we're losing something vital to the growth of RISD.



► Dorian celebrates with players on the sideline during a game against Landmark College. November 5, 2022



Conclusion

& Special Thanks

MORE THAN A DICK JOKE

So, after reading these histories, perusing decades of film photographs, jerseys, posters, and merchandise, and hearing the oral histories of the men and women who were witnesses to RISD Basketball's evolution, do you take us seriously now? At the end of the day, there is only so much I can do to convince the institution at large that the RISD Balls, and all athletic teams at RISD, have been just as important to the history of the school as any famous individual alum or college president. My hope is that even if you still aren't convinced that sports belong at an art school and should be held with just as much esteem as our fine arts or design departments, that you have at least found some form of common history and common struggles that show themselves among any movement or community that grows from a place like a New England art school.

This whole "experiment", the very idea of sports at an art school, was and is entirely student-led. Yes, today the teams receive funding from our student activities organization, but without the passion of those students to keep these things alive, then the powers that be would be more than happy to cut out the budget and save it for something else. Community involvement is key to sustaining athletics at RISD. From the 1920s to the 2020s, players have been begging their busy friends to come out to a game and forget about their studio work for just one evening. When I spoke to these alumni who played or attended RISD basketball games over the years, they rarely mentioned in great detail the play on the court itself, but rather were quick to talk about whatever antics surrounded the painted lines. From flirtatious announcers to student cheer teams, phallic mascots, and promotional events, the greatest memories came from the atmosphere that a RISD athletic event facilitated.

I often think about Bill Miller's point about how the Balls are a work of "performance art", because he is exactly right. It's the school's greatest exhibition of student work on display, but instead of a gallery space, our creation lives between two metal baskets. I can call myself a collegiate athlete and laugh to myself that I technically played against Division III schools in college, but really all I am is a parody of what in my head I envision a college basketball player to be. We only practice once a week, and outside of that time, there are zero dietary considerations or high-intensity workouts planned. But, for a few hours a week I can pretend to be an athlete. That's what drew me to this team in the first place, all those years ago when I was just a freshman wandering the quad looking for a club to join. In high school I had been turned off by the toxic intensity of sports, the all-or-nothing mentality that alienated a majority of our community, and a reputation to think about personal glory rather than the achievement of just being a team who can work together towards a common goal.

I don't want to sound like a hippie, but the Balls are a welcoming community. Anyone can join, no matter your size, shape, or identity. You might not make the cut at tryouts but there's nothing stopping you from being a fan and enjoying the thrill of school spirit that so seldom finds its way drifting through RISD's campus. RISD itself underwent a recent rebrand that aimed to unite the school's identity under a common logo, a common color, and a common typeface, but how do we root for our peers? As of May 2026, all RISD club team merchandise continues to collect dust in boxes underneath the RISD Store, locked away and hidden from the community members who helped create these teams that proudly wear the school's name on their chest.

How do you cheer for your collective when there is no shared identity for the student body? Beyond

the individual achievements of my friends, how do we unite under a common banner, a common team, a common dick joke? What are we losing if there is no mascot to doodle on our posters, no fun motto, or even a school song? I know I'm asking a lot of questions here but really the most important to me at this moment is what is the history of RISD, and furthermore, whose history is being preserved? Bill Reynolds wrote extensively about the achievements of small town high school and collegiate basketball players in New England, but understood that the world at large is willfully ignorant of the architects of now global icons like the game of basketball. In the introduction to his book *Our Game: The Story of New England Basketball*, he put it simply: "this book is an attempt to capture them before they all disappear, lost to time and blurred memories".

These men and women will disappear, their work forgotten and absorbed into the collective history of RISD itself, but that should not be an opportunity to let their acts pass without notice. I am preserving their stories, their memories, and binding them together in this book not just for a college course, but for the sake of the future of the school itself. History can be a hard and difficult thing to discuss at times, but it should never be forgotten for what it is. Maybe some dick jokes don't age well, maybe an alum becomes controversial long after they graduated, but just because these things make us uncomfortable does not mean that it should be swept under the rug and ignored.

When you join the Balls, you join a lineage of artists who didn't want to give up on their basketball dreams, or perhaps just had the athletic itch that needed to be scratched by the team. The team has won championships, beaten organized Division III teams, and receives a healthy budget from the school to continue to play. But on the flip side, there have been seasons where the team hasn't won a single game, or they struggle to have enough players for practice, and fight for the support and respect from their community—but they still show up. They stick together, like all Balls do.

This project would be nothing without the resources available at the RISD Archives, but also because of the Balls' own alumni network. It is perhaps ironic or even embarrassing for everyone else at RISD, but the Balls have one of the strongest alumni communities around. The list is updated annually and used to invite them back to campus for our annual alumni games. When I began this project, much of the information came from whatever resources I could find online, but once that ran out, I turned to the alumni. Most had no idea who I was before we met and had a limited understanding of

the still forming idea I had for this book, but by just mentioning the RISD Balls, they were more than willing to put aside some time to talk with me.

I urge you now to celebrate the many overlapping circles of your internal venn diagram and be everything you are unapologetically. Never regret what you are or the contradictions that make you the individual that's loved by so many. You can be an artist and an athlete, a jock and a sensitive thinker, a physical specimen and a mental fortress of creation. You only get one skin, so use it well and use it wisely. Make all you can before you're gone and as many coaches have told me before: leave it all on the court out there.

In addition to the countless people who helped form and foster the game of basketball at RISD, I'd like to especially thank:

Tim Prout 65 ID
 Larry Appleton 64 BS LA
 Bill "Steamboat" Ewen 63 GD
 Joseph Cooke
 Cornelis De Boer 70 BArch
 Dan Fergus 89 IL
 Sean Gayle 90 ID
 Randy Guillot 90 BArch
 Michael Esordi 91 GD
 Edwin Kuo 89 GD
 Edward Guttman 90 GD
 Joe Gebbia 05 GD/ID
 Amanda Penecale 06 IL
 Anthony Petrie 04 GD
 Bill Miller 91 PT
 Gavin Engel 12 ID
 Don Morton
 Byron Olson 12 IL
 John Bai 14 ID
 Manny Hernandez 16 GD
 President Emerita Rosanne Somerson 76 ID
 Sarah Knarr
 Tim Plummer 16 GD
 Gresh Chapman 25 ID
 Tila Adams
 Dorian Epps 21 ID
 Sitarah Lakhani 26 ID
 James Burgat 26 GD
 Dan Fitzpatrick 07 GD
 Ali Beaudette
 Anther Kiley MFA 13 GD
 Elizabeth Goodspeed 16 GD
 Paul Soulellis
 Emily Rye MFA 11 GD
 Lois Harada 10 PR

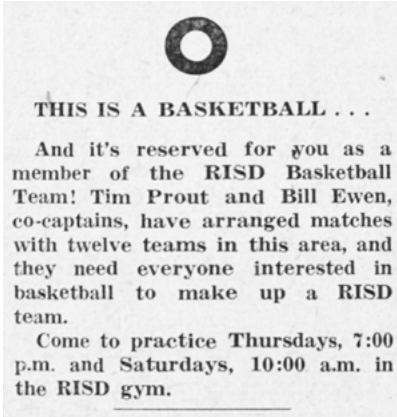


▲ The 2026 Balls Alumni Game.
April 11, 2026

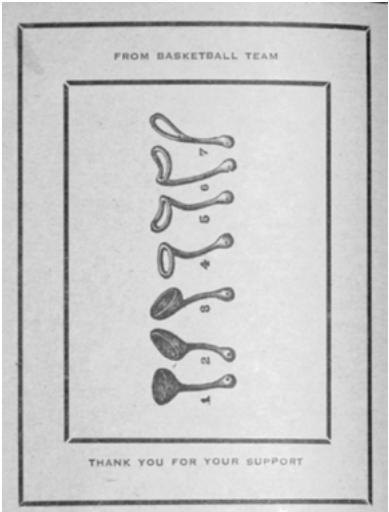
Dear RISD Basketball team
I play and love Basketball My
Name is Charlie Boland and I
am a Huge fan of your
Basketball team. I am writing
YOU because I wanted to know
If it would be possible to send
me back some Merch and Maybe
even some Outographs. If your
team is generous enough to
send me a shirt or Jersey
My size is Youth Medium or
Large.

My thanks
Charlie Boland
CBSD

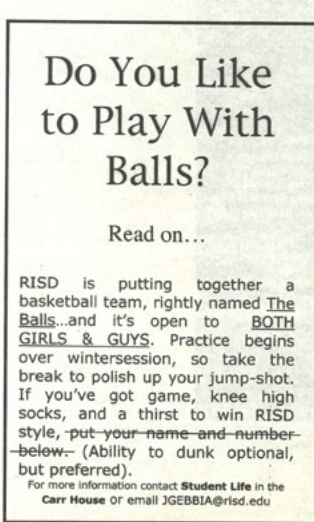
▲ A letter sent from a child
from Santa Fe, CA with no
connections to the RISD
community but a love of
basketball and the RISD Balls.
The letter is now framed and
hangs in Dorian Epps' office in
the SFC. November 12, 2024



November 11, 1963 — Bill Ewen & Tim Prout



March 11, 1964



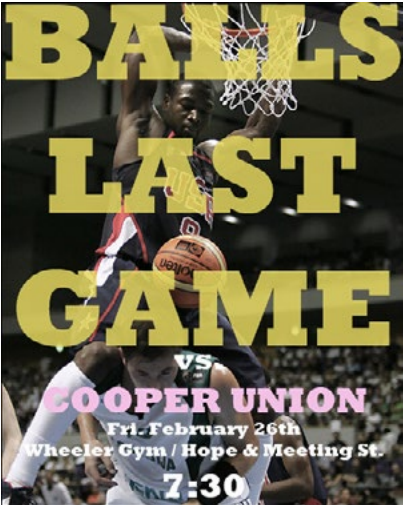
December 2, 2000 — Joe Gebbia



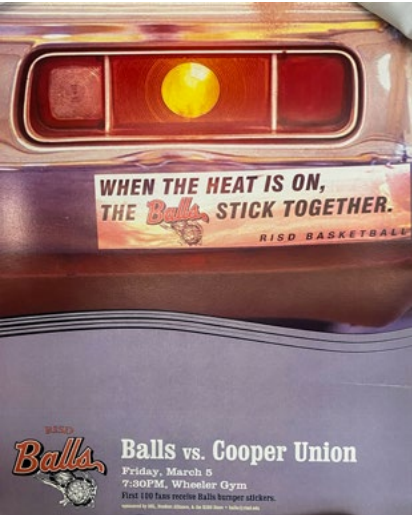
November 20, 2009



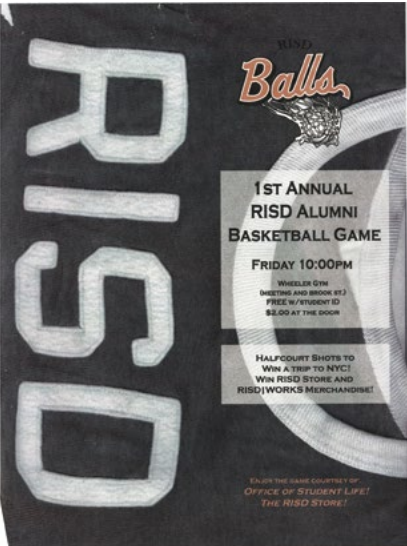
February 5, 2010



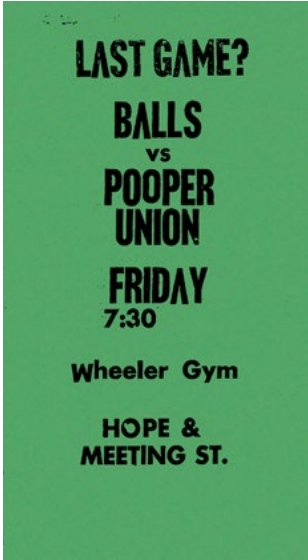
February 26, 2010



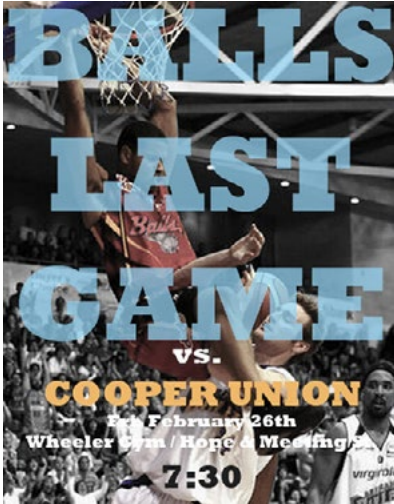
March 5, 2002 — Joe Gebbia



October 10, 2003 — Joe Gebbia



circa 2004



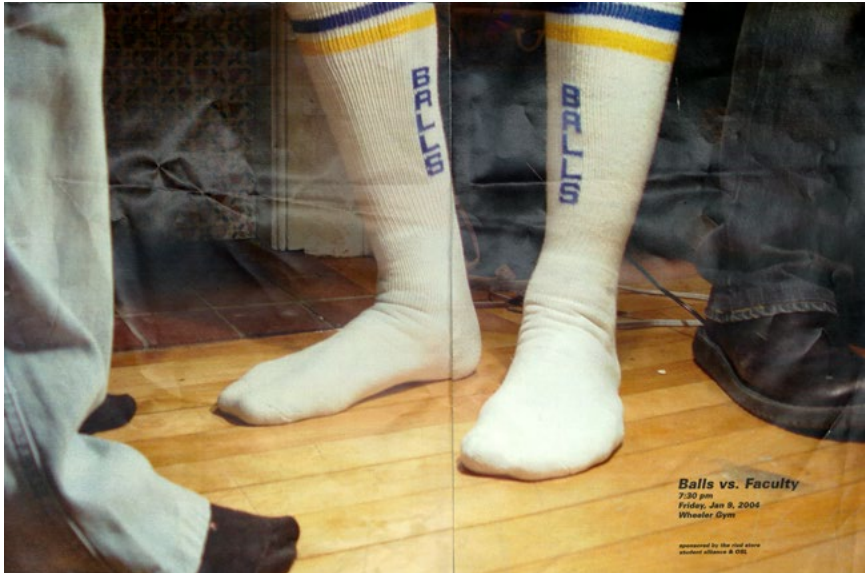
February 26, 2010



November 10, 2010



February 25, 2011



January 9, 2004



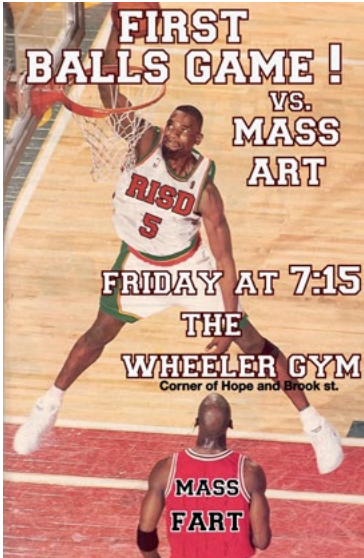
November 7, 2009



November 13, 2011



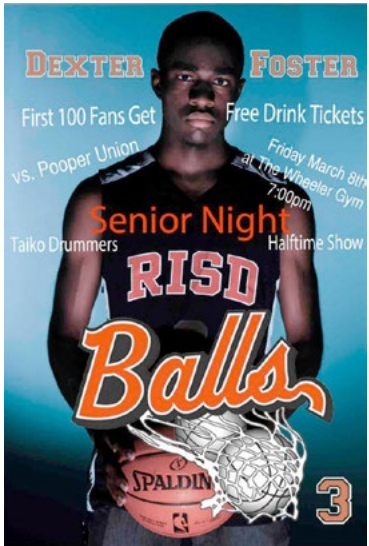
January 18, 2012



December 4, 2012



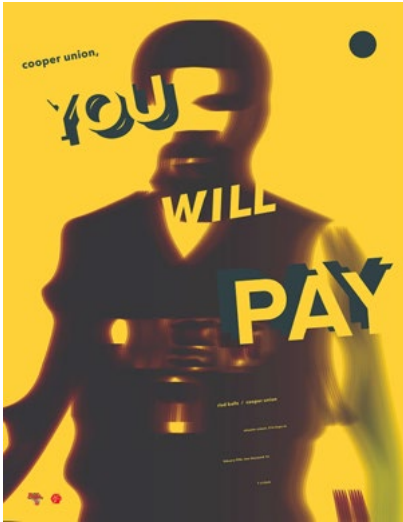
February 2013



March 8, 2013



November 2013 — Philippe Cao



February 5, 2016 — Manny Hernandez



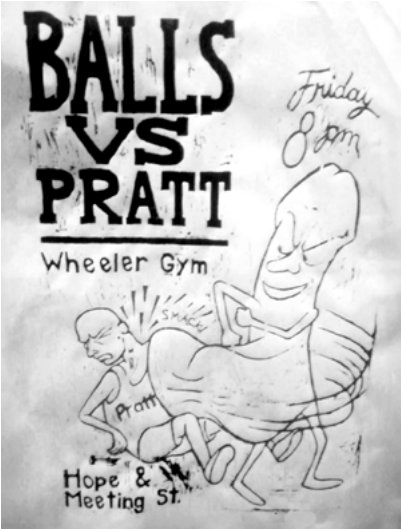
February 5, 2016 — Manny Hernandez



October 8, 2016



February 14, 2014



circa 2014



circa 2014 — Manny Hernandez



October 10, 2016



February 2, 2018 — Dorian Epps



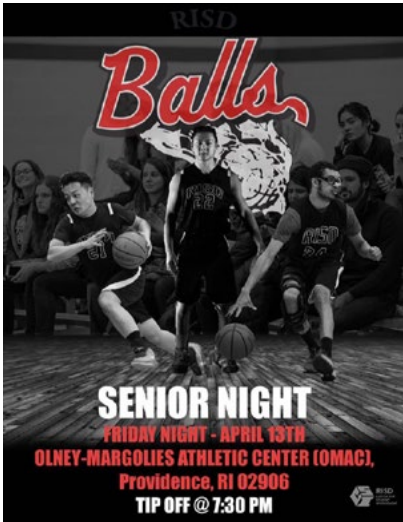
February 14, 2015 — Manny Hernandez



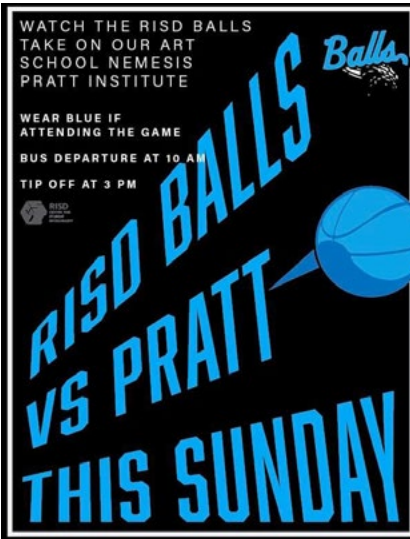
February 27, 2015 — Manny Hernandez



January 23, 2015 — Manny Hernandez



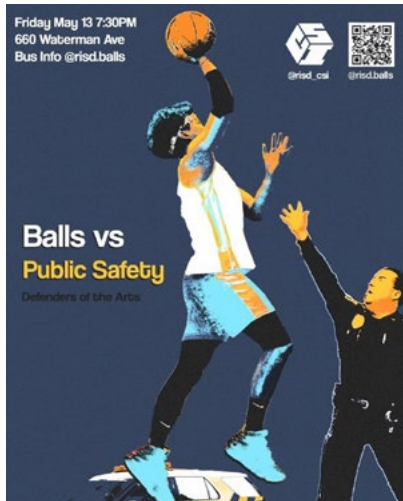
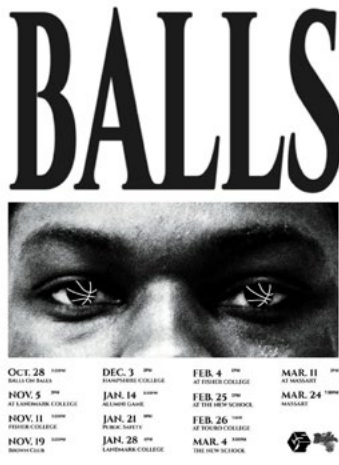
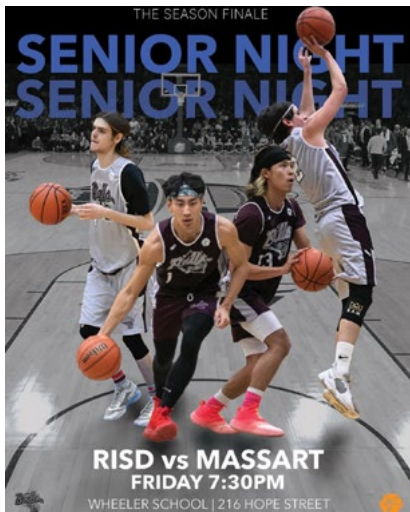
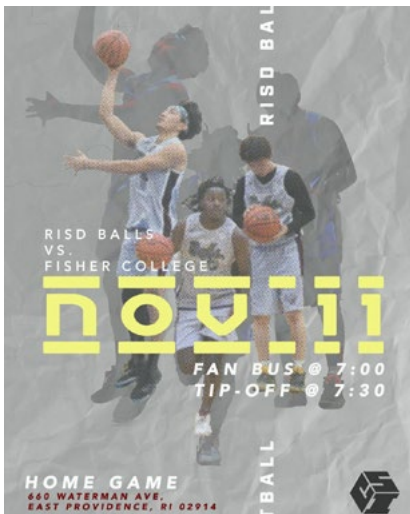
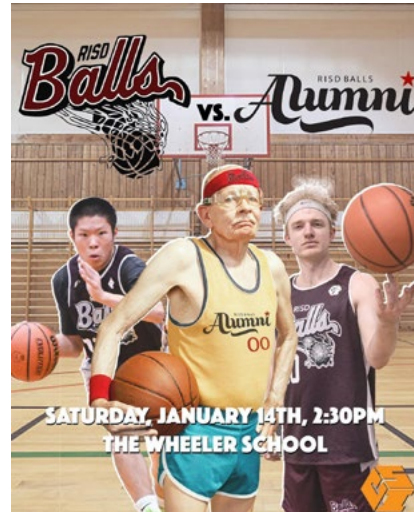
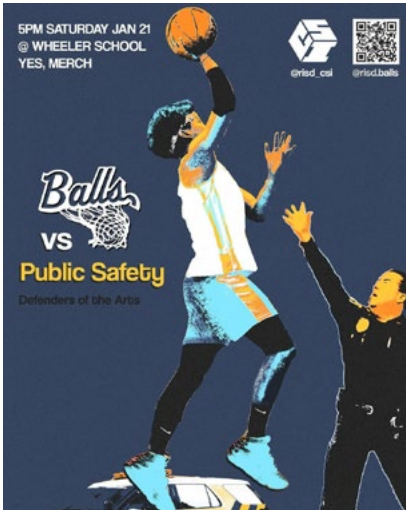
April 13, 2018 — Dorian Epps

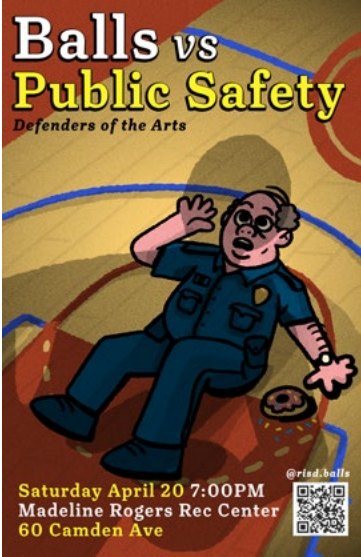
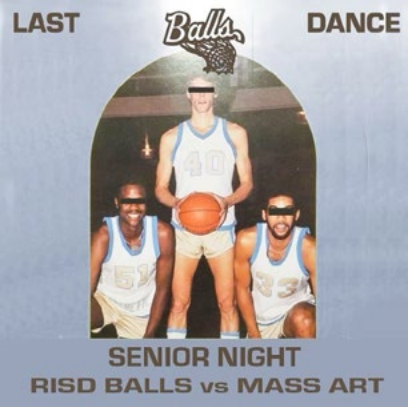
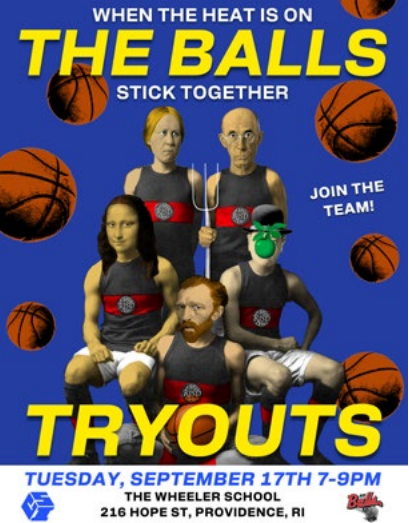
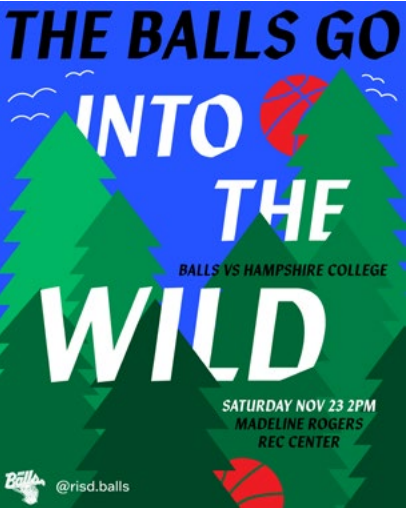
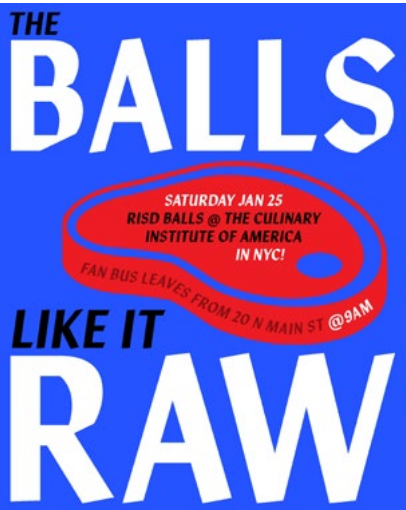
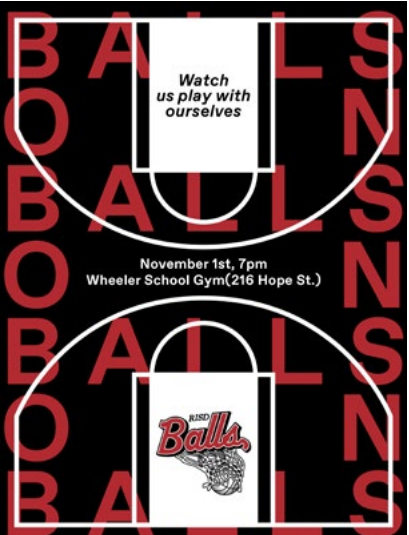


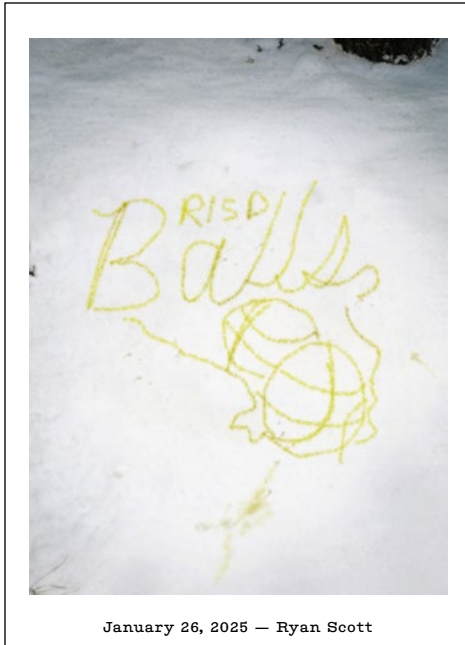
February 2020 — Dorian Epps



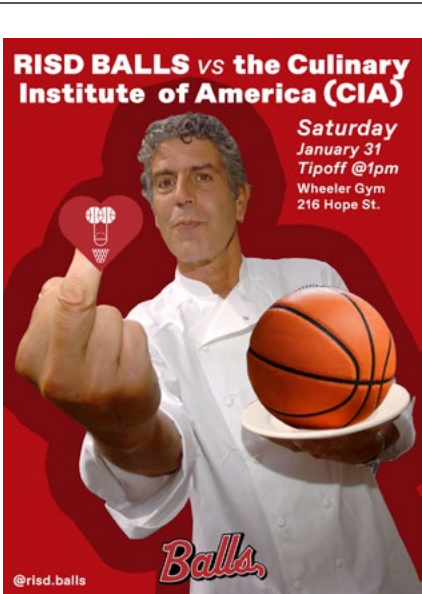
April 29, 2022 — Gresh Chapman

 Friday May 13 7:30PM 660 Waterman Ave Bus Info @riscd.balls Balls vs Public Safety Defenders of the Arts	 BALLS <table><tr><td>OCT. 28 BALLS vs BULLS AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE</td><td>DEC. 3 HAMPDEN COLLEGE JAN. 14 HAMPDEN COLLEGE</td><td>FEB. 4 AT FISHER COLLEGE FEB. 25 AT THE NEW SCHOOL</td><td>MAR. 11 AT MASSART MAR. 24 MASSART</td></tr><tr><td>NOV. 5 AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE</td><td>JAN. 21 PUNK SAFETY JAN. 28 LUTHERAN COLLEGE</td><td>FEB. 26 AT TOWN COLLEGE MAR. 4 THE NEW SCHOOL</td><td></td></tr></table>	OCT. 28 BALLS vs BULLS AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE	DEC. 3 HAMPDEN COLLEGE JAN. 14 HAMPDEN COLLEGE	FEB. 4 AT FISHER COLLEGE FEB. 25 AT THE NEW SCHOOL	MAR. 11 AT MASSART MAR. 24 MASSART	NOV. 5 AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE	JAN. 21 PUNK SAFETY JAN. 28 LUTHERAN COLLEGE	FEB. 26 AT TOWN COLLEGE MAR. 4 THE NEW SCHOOL		 HALLOWEEN BALLS ON BALLS SCRIMMAGE FRIDAY OCT 28TH 7:30 PM - AT WHEELER SCHOOL (216 HOPE STREET)	 Only two left. Balls vs Narwhals March 4, 2023 @ 3:30 The Wheeler School, 216 Hope St.	 THE SEASON FINALE SENIOR NIGHT SENIOR NIGHT RISD vs MASSART FRIDAY 7:30PM WHEELER SCHOOL 216 HOPE STREET	 !TRYOUTS! 7pm MONDAY NOV 6th MADELINE ROGERS REC CENTER
OCT. 28 BALLS vs BULLS AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE	DEC. 3 HAMPDEN COLLEGE JAN. 14 HAMPDEN COLLEGE	FEB. 4 AT FISHER COLLEGE FEB. 25 AT THE NEW SCHOOL	MAR. 11 AT MASSART MAR. 24 MASSART										
NOV. 5 AT LUTHERAN COLLEGE	JAN. 21 PUNK SAFETY JAN. 28 LUTHERAN COLLEGE	FEB. 26 AT TOWN COLLEGE MAR. 4 THE NEW SCHOOL											
May 13, 2022 — Gresh Chapman	October 2022	October 28, 2022	March 4, 2023 — Ryan Scott	March 24, 2023	November 6, 2023 — Gresh Chapman								
 RISD LANDMARK THIS SATURDAY NOV 5 BUS LEAVES AT 10:30AM OUTSIDE CHASE CENTER (229 NORTH MAIN STREET)	 RISD BALLS vs. FISHER COLLEGE NOV 11 FAN BUS @ 7:00 TIP-OFF @ 7:30 HOME GAME 660 WATERMAN AVE EAST PROVIDENCE, RI 02914	 RISD BALLS vs Alumni SATURDAY, JANUARY 14TH, 2:30PM THE WHEELER SCHOOL	 THESE TRUNKS CAN'T HOLD OUR BALLS RISD BALLS vs. MASTODONS Saturday 12/9 @ 2PM Selim Madelin Rogers Recreation Center 60 Camden Ave	 Balls at Landmark 1/27 Bus 9:30 Chase Center 20 N. Main St	 Balls MAR. 3, 2PM AT NEW SCHOOL MAR. 16, 2PM VS BROWN MAR. 23, 2PM VS NEW SCHOOL APR. 20, 7PM VS PUBLIC SAFETY/ALUMNI APR. 27, 7PM VS MASSART SENIOR NIGHT								
November 5, 2022	November 11, 2022	January 14, 2023 — Gresh Chapman	December 9, 2023 — Ryan Scott	January 27, 2024 — Gresh Chapman	February 22, 2024 — Ryan Scott								
 5PM SATURDAY JAN 21 @ WHEELER SCHOOL YES, MERCH Balls vs Public Safety Defenders of the Arts	 LANDMARK SHARKS @ RISD BALLS 4PM THIS SATURDAY JAN 28 @ THE WHEELER SCHOOL	 Balls vs THE NEW SCHOOL SATURDAY, MARCH 4TH 3:30PM The Wheeler School 216 Hope St	 BATTLE IN NEW YORK THIS SUNDAY MARCH 3RD RISD BALLS vs NEW SCHOOL NARWHALS JOIN US FOR AN AWAY GAME IN NEW YORK. DM TO SECURE A FREE SPOT ON THE ROUND TRIP MORNING BUS	 RISD BALLS vs THE NEW SCHOOL PARSONS									
January 31, 2023 — Gresh Chapman	January 28, 2023	March 4, 2023 — Ryan Scott	March 3, 2024 — Tem Matanmi	March 23, 2024 — Gresh Chapman									

 April 20, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 April 27, 2024 — Gresh Chapman	 September 17, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 March 22, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 May 3, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 May 3, 2025 — Ryan Scott
 October 18, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 November 3, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 November 9, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 October 10, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 October 14, 2025 — 2025	 October 30, 2025 — Ryan Scott
 November 23, 2024 — Ryan Scott	 January 23, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 January 25, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 November 1, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 December 4, 2025 — Ryan Scott	 December 5, 2025 — Ryan Scott



January 26, 2025 — Ryan Scott



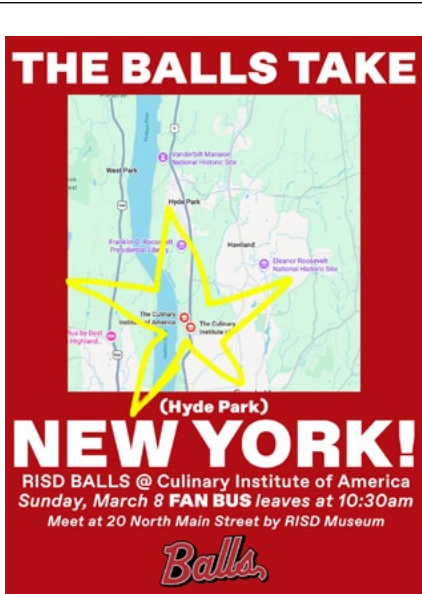
January 31, 2025 — Ryan Scott



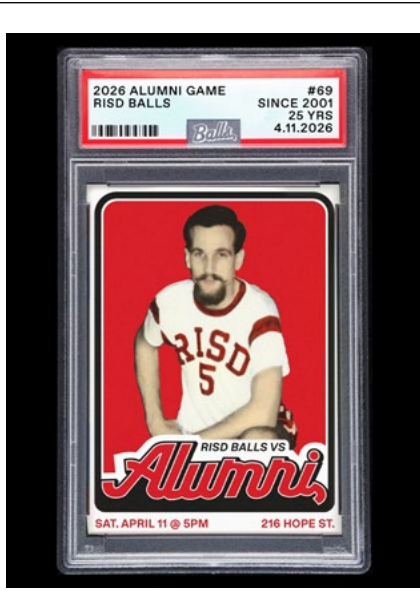
February 10, 2026 — Ryan Scott



February 13, 2026 — Ryan Scott



March 8, 2026 — Ryan Scott



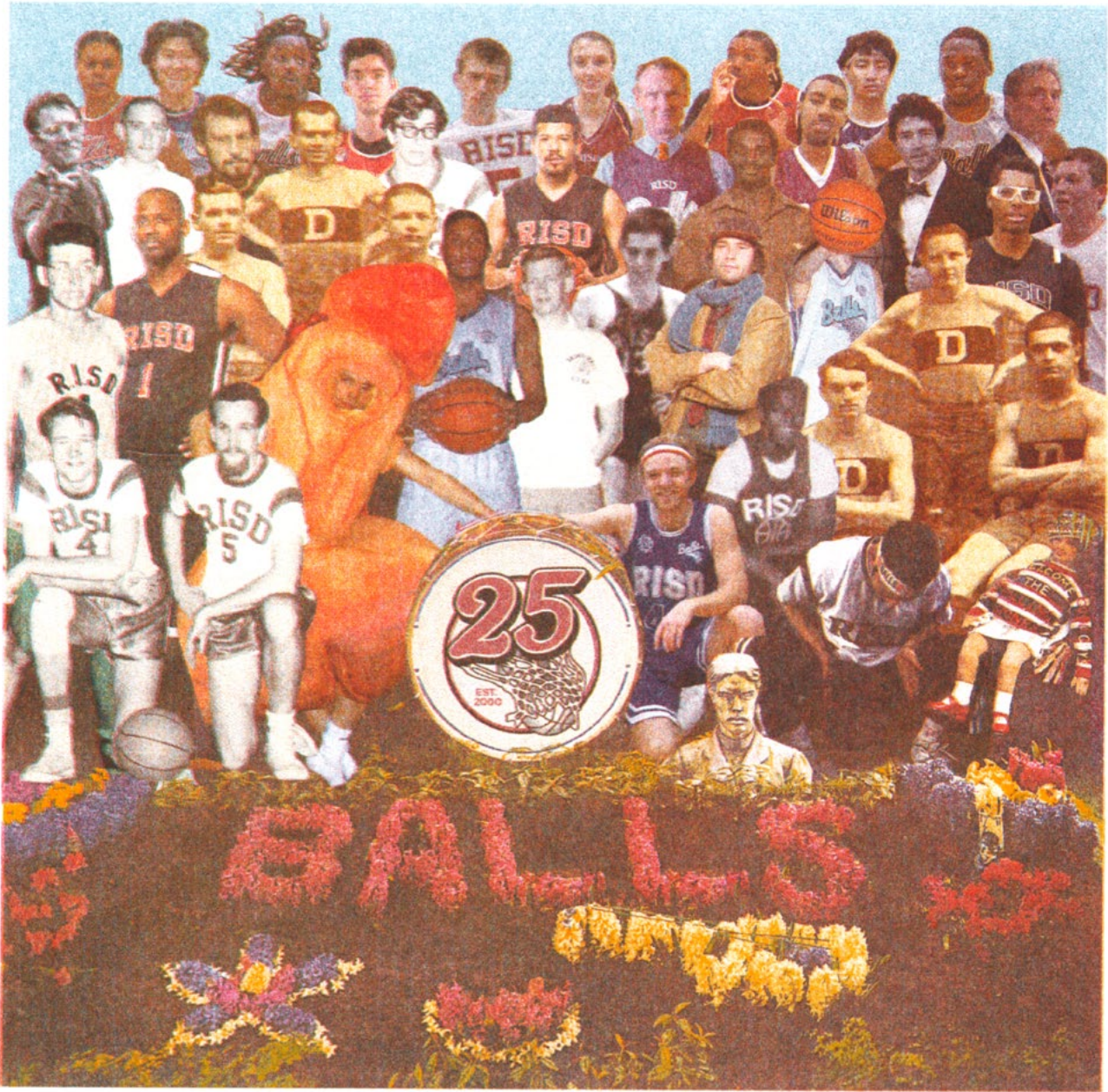
April 11, 2026 — Ryan Scott



April 11, 2026 — Ryan Scott



April 24, 2026 — Ryan Scott



"All you need is a BFA and a basketball!"

April 15, 2026 — Ryan Scott



c. 1914



c. 1948



c. 1962 — front



c. 1962 — back



c. 1948 — front



c. 1948 — back



c. 1962



c. 1987



2001-2002



2002-2003



2009-2010



2010-2011



2002-2007



2004-2008



2011-2012



2012-2014



2014–2017



2014–2017



2019–2020



2021–2023



2017–2019



2017–2019



2021–2023



2022–2023 — Alumni Game



2023–2024



2023–2024



2024–2025 — Alumni Game



2025–2026



2024–2025



2024–2025



2025–2026



2025–2026 — Alumni Game



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A

Adams, Tila 368, 372, 386
AirBnb 210
Allen, Gordon 29, 49, 53, 68, 80, 96
Appleton, Larry 6, 48, 49, 50, 53, 62, 73, 78, 82, 386
Artnicks 57
Artniks 49, 53, 62
Athletic Association 13, 14, 17, 21, 23, 25, 29, 30, 36, 43
Athletic Committee 30, 35

B

Bailey, Steve 138, 239, 244
Balls Initiative 159, 229, 270
Beyoncé 353, 356
Big Nazo 240, 266
Bill Reynolds 10, 14, 165, 248, 271, 386
Blacktop Market 383
Blake, Adam 353
Blizzard of 2026 303
Block Party 314, 326
Blockprint 30, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 48, 49, 50, 57, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 80
Blue Balls 276, 277, 280, 378
Boston 14, 16, 48, 112, 159, 168, 212, 244, 271, 321
Brown University 10, 17, 45, 62, 98, 104, 205
Bryant University 23
Bugden, Ryan 209
Bump Hadley 45, 48, 49, 57
Burghoff, David 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35
Burlington Free Press 137, 145, 237, 240
Bush-Brown, Albert 50, 53

C

Carr Haus 270, 293, 294
Carr House 96, 133, 223, 224, 369
Center for Student Involvement 133, 270, 271, 314, 315, 319, 345, 346, 347, 348, 359, 369, 376
Chapman, Gresh 278, 281, 293, 358, 362, 386, 392, 393, 394, 395
Clark University 135, 138, 225
Climbax 360
Converse 44, 168, 244, 271
Cooke, Joe 64, 65, 70, 138, 386

Cooper Union 137, 138, 159, 165, 167, 168, 169, 172, 183, 205, 212, 225, 229, 233, 240, 243, 244, 246, 248, 255, 265, 271, 274, 275, 276, 278, 316, 319, 320, 321, 328, 332, 337, 354, 376, 378
COVID 277, 278, 348, 359, 360, 363, 376, 377
Cow Lovers Association 120, 121
Culinary Institute of America 294, 298, 303, 304, 377

D

Dean Steve Baker 137, 225, 248, 320, 321
Division III 135, 138, 225, 239, 248, 278, 320, 385, 386

E

Eidam, Luther 48, 50, 53, 83, 87
Engel, Gavin 169, 264, 268, 386
Epps, Dorian 7, 276, 277, 278, 281, 293, 315, 324, 347, 374, 382, 386, 388, 392
Ernst, Vinnie 44, 45, 46, 47, 48
Ewen, Bill 31, 43, 45, 47, 48, 49, 53, 62, 73, 83, 86, 92, 138, 386, 389
Express-O 97

F

Facebook 104, 208, 217, 276, 277, 378
Fairey, Shephard 121, 126
Fergus, Dan 101, 113, 386
Fisher College 293
Flynn, Ray 44
Francis, Lloyd 104, 109, 113

G

Gayle, Sean 99, 104, 108, 386
Gebbia, Joe 6, 88, 89, 133, 138, 159, 165, 205, 210, 212, 215, 222, 224, 225, 228, 233, 234, 238, 244, 265, 270, 319, 323, 328, 348, 368, 383, 386, 389
Gendo Taiko 205, 378
Guillot, Randy 99, 112, 124, 386

H

Hampshire College 212, 293, 294
Head of the Charles Regatta 359
Hernandez, Manny 212, 214, 275, 276, 326, 330, 383, 386, 391, 392
Hope High School 16, 19, 29, 30, 45, 53, 62, 68, 72, 79, 95

Huger Elliott 10
Hurd, Donald W. 18

J

James Naismith 9, 10
Jockstraps 135, 224
Johnny Rockets 135, 239, 240
Johnson and Wales 44, 48, 49, 50, 62, 79, 99, 105, 113

K

Keany, Frank 14
Kibbe, Frank 48, 49, 50, 57, 72, 83
Knarr, Sarah 346, 350, 386
Kuo, Edwin 114

L

Landmark College 293, 295, 323, 379, 384
Lundin, Lars N. 60

M

Madeline Rogers Recreation Center 293, 294, 376
Mandle, Roger 135, 137, 138, 224, 240, 253, 336, 337, 342
MassArt 62, 169, 205, 207, 212, 218, 246, 265, 275, 276, 278, 279, 293, 294, 314, 316, 319, 321, 328, 354
Metcalf Building 14
Met, The 347, 377
Midnight Soccer 354, 359
Miller, Bill 168, 169, 172, 174, 244, 250, 265, 266, 271, 314, 319, 385, 386
Mixed Media 135, 159, 160
Morris, Brandon 278, 281, 293, 315
Morton, Don 168, 240, 244, 266, 270, 273, 319, 321, 386

N

Nads 62, 67, 69, 99, 104, 105, 121, 133, 135, 138, 147, 169, 187, 224, 232, 239, 240, 269, 270, 278, 281, 294, 336, 353, 354, 358, 359, 360, 368, 369, 370, 380
NASBI 212, 219, 271, 276, 314, 321, 328, 338
NBA 10, 14, 223, 265, 341, 358
NCAA 14, 17, 44, 45, 99, 205, 320
New England 9, 10, 14, 17, 18, 23, 30, 35, 45, 66, 113, 120, 212, 225, 232, 248, 276, 321, 338, 385, 386
New School 169, 212, 276, 293, 294, 321
NIL 8, 218

O

Office for Student Life 133, 135, 168, 223, 224, 270, 271, 369
Olney-Margolies Athletic Center 98, 104, 376, 377
Olson, Byron 7, 169, 205, 212, 214, 218, 265, 270, 278, 281, 293, 314, 316, 318, 319, 347, 374, 386

P

Penecale, Amanda 138, 232, 236, 386
Petrie, Anthony 135, 238, 242, 355, 386
Philadelphia 232, 331
Pisswater Beer 118, 120, 122
Plummer, Tim 331, 352, 386
Pratt 138, 165, 168, 169, 174, 183, 187, 201, 205, 212, 216, 240, 244, 246, 248, 252, 253, 254, 265, 271, 272, 276, 277, 278, 315, 319, 354, 376, 377
President Williams 347
Pricks 369
Prout, Tim 45, 48, 49, 72, 76, 83, 386, 389
Providence 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 23, 25, 27, 39, 44, 45, 46, 48, 57, 62, 64, 65, 79, 85, 86, 88, 95, 99, 104, 105, 118, 135, 165, 205, 212, 224, 225, 240, 248, 271, 272, 275, 278, 279, 303, 315, 319, 326, 349, 363, 369
Providence College 10, 16, 44, 45, 46, 79, 85, 275
Providence Journal 11, 13, 17, 27, 62, 64, 65, 165, 224, 248, 271
Providence Steamrollers 23, 25, 27
Public Safety 239, 278, 279, 293, 294, 300, 303, 322, 360

Q

Quonset 50, 65, 73, 80

R

Red Bull Soapbox Race 272
Red Devils 41, 44, 49, 62, 64, 65, 68, 72, 86
Rhode Island School of Design 10, 13, 225
RISD Blend 138
RISD Gym 21, 22, 23, 29, 30, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 53, 60, 63, 87, 95
RISD Hoops 99, 100, 101, 104, 112, 113

RISD Jugs 356
RISD Rag 96
RISD Store 137, 138, 154, 222, 229, 281, 358, 368, 369, 370, 385
RISD Voice 99
Rob Chron 215
Rogers, Andrew 169, 205, 214, 253, 315
Ross, RaMell 212, 214, 320

S

Saintilus, Kyree 348
Salamander, The 16, 18, 19, 20
Sarah Lawrence 165, 168, 169, 199, 244, 246, 265, 316
Savers 281, 359, 360
Scott, Ryan 6, 2, 72, 78, 86, 104, 112, 222, 232, 238, 244, 264, 271, 281, 293, 294, 300, 314, 326, 336, 346, 352, 358, 368, 374, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398
Scrotie 4, 17, 224, 226, 240, 272, 274, 338, 347, 353, 354, 358
Seabees 50, 53, 57, 60, 62, 64, 65, 73, 80
Seekonk 135, 224, 239
Skolos, Nancy 327, 328
Somerson, Rosanne 7, 277, 336, 344, 376, 386
Southern New England Coastal Conference Basketball League 23, 30
Student Activities Organization 48, 66, 89, 97
Student Designer, The 17, 18
Student Fitness Center 100, 104, 137, 138, 159, 212, 270, 336, 349, 369, 373

T

Textile Building 14, 16, 17
Thayer Street 135, 239, 326
The Balls Initiative 159
Tits 360, 380

V

Vietnam War 63, 65, 67, 69

W

Waterman Street 272
Wedell, Tom 327, 328
Wheeler Gym 99, 113, 135, 138, 165, 225, 245, 277, 341, 353
Wheeler School 98, 101, 105, 113, 135, 167, 174, 199, 201, 225, 252, 293
Wilson, Raymond 57, 62, 64
Wintersession 222, 224, 281, 300, 360

World War II 20, 21

Y

YMCA 9, 10, 337

COLOPHON

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